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Film, Media Culture, and Critical Practices

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This issue of *The Projector* focuses on debates about film, media culture and critical practices. It brings together a collection of essays that interrogate both cinema’s function as a representational medium and the function of cinema criticism as a method of evaluating the social and cultural significance of that medium. From modernist audiences’ assessment of the formal elements of film to the contemporary political uses of the James Bond franchise to the limitations of film criticism as a form of political activism, these essays examine specific cinematic texts, production practices, or theories of spectatorship, but they also invite us to reconsider theoretical debates surrounding the cinema, as well as the role of the cinema critic.

In the first of the referred essays, “From This Moment on: The Dialectics of Modernism,” Darin D. Kerr argues for an interdisciplinary view of modernist aesthetics in which “visual literacy” during the modernist period is understood as moving increasingly towards “a process of juxtaposing an understanding of one form or medium against the comprehension of another.” Using early film audiences’ reception of motion pictures as an example of this process, Kerr contends that, for those audiences, the appraisal of cinema as an artistic medium was shaped by
the ways in which their familiarity with other visual media both informed and was contrasted with their assessment of film’s “quality of movement and how [it] achieved that quality.” Rejecting the prevailing scholarly view of the modernist period as “a narrative of the triumph of mechanization,” he uses Jean Epstein’s concept of photogénie to theorize this form of spectatorship, as well as to suggest that “our understanding of aesthetic engagement in the modernist period can be better understood as an interdisciplinary, dialectical process” that sees the modernist aesthetic as a contradictory and multi-faceted confluence of artistic forms rather than only as “an inexorable march towards mechanization/fascism.”

Turning to the ideological dimensions of contemporary cinema, the second referred essay, Mark Bernard’s “‘Christ, I Miss The Cold War’: James Bond, 9/11 and Casino Royale,” argues that the film Casino Royale updates the Bond franchise in light of the 9/11 attacks, not by replacing the Cold War rhetoric indicative of earlier Bond films with post-9/11 discourses concerning the need for decisive action in the face of perceived terrorist threats, but rather by joining the two together in order to “justify and validate the hard-nosed, paranoid, and bellicose tactics that the United States and its allies are utilizing in the ‘war on terror.’” Bernard analyzes the film’s narrative and stylistic departures from earlier Bond installments—it’s darker tone, it’s graphic depictions of violence, and it’s thematic exploration of the physical and emotional toll that “saving the world” takes upon Bond—in order to explore the ways in which this more “serious” and “realistic” portrayal of 007 merges Cold War paranoia with post-9/11 vigilance, positioning the updated Bond as at once the embodiment of U.S. vulnerability and the epitome of U.S. resolve. By situating the film in a long line of cinematic narratives that offer imaginary solutions to real political problems, Bernard also suggests that the film can be read as “a testament to how the Cold War modes of thinking, and icons like James Bond, really never left
us, but instead have disguised themselves under the veneer of ‘realism’ and ‘seriousness’ and continue to inform the ways in which we envision and conceptualize our current global and political situation.”

In an editorial essay entitled “Subversive Fictions: A Patina of Radicalism in Corporate Media Society,” Cynthia Baron analyzes what she identifies as the tendency in contemporary media and cultural studies scholarship to conflate “avant-garde aesthetics and avant-garde politics,” and to equate “cultural commentary with political action” such that the consumption of corporately produced media texts that promote themselves as “subversive” through their rejection of highbrow taste or middlebrow morality has come to be seen as an act of political radicalism. Using *Easy Rider* and the films of Quentin Tarantino and Eli Roth as examples, Baron notes that the status of film as a commercial commodity, its production within a corporate media structure, and the contingency of its circulation upon expectations that it will turn a profit for its producers/distributors all place limits on the extent to which any individual film can or will challenge the status quo, while the promise of “subversive” content or the use of directors and the casting of actors with “radical” star personas function far more effectively as marketing tools to attract “allegedly counterculture audiences” than they do as guarantors of alternative political statements.

In an effort to explain how this engagement with “subversive” representations became a “natural” option for people searching for an “authentic” connection to a world out there, Baron draws on the work of Raymond Williams. She proposes that our “intense engagement with representations” and “overriding sense that political action is something done by someone else out there” can be seen as responses to what Williams has described as the experience of mobile privatization (increased mobility combined with increased isolation) integral to industrial/post-
industrial life where people are separated by distance but able to keep in touch. With the arrival of radio, television, and the internet, these responses have been intensified to the point that we live in what Williams has termed “a dramatized society” in which “stories” from out a world out there are channeled into “private” space on a 24/7 basis. In this context, “subversive” cultural products can take on special importance, for, situated as we are, looking out at a world out there, they seem to put us in touch with moments of authentic experience.

Finally, the Forum on Hollywood Blockbusters in this issue is comprised of a series of invited contributions that reflect on the essays collected in Julian Stringer’s Movie Blockbusters. Contributors Darin D. Kerr, Sudipto Sanyal, Kevan A. Feshami, Justin Philpot, Christian Remse, Bryan McGeary, Carolyn J. Sweet, J.R. Rawlins, and Ed Uszynski expand upon several of the arguments proposed in the anthology, including how the blockbuster is defined, if the blockbuster form can be applied to national cinemas outside of the United States, and how economic factors influence the methods of production, distribution and exhibition, as well as the viewing, of the blockbuster. However, the forum essays also introduce new topics for analysis in relation to the blockbuster, as well as seek to problematize existing scholarship in this area. Taking up the issues of the art/commerce binary, the cultural relevance of the blockbuster and its ideological uses, the gendering of the genre, its content, and its presumed audiences, and the ways in which questions of taste influence critical reception of the blockbuster, these essays not only challenge us to reconsider the ways in which the blockbuster is studied by media and cultural scholars, but the majority also point out gaps in current scholarship and/or blindspots in current methods of analysis, and propose suggestions for how the blockbuster might not only be studied differently, but also more comprehensively.
From This Moment on: The Dialectics of Modernism

Darin D. Kerr

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Walter Benjamin, in his influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” opens with an epigraph from Paul Valéry’s Aesthetics: “Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours” (qtd. in Benjamin 217). Here Valéry distinguishes his own aesthetic moment from those preceding it through a differentiation in terms of the “power of action upon things,” an ability to control, to possess, to master. This impulse in Valéry, to identify not only the degree, but perhaps the very fact of one’s own progressiveness through comparison to others’, may arguably be somehow innate in the human psyche, though I don’t propose to take that question up in this essay. Valéry’s emphasis on development and progress, however, does set the modernist stage for Benjamin’s own deeply ambivalent examination of the ramifications of (then-)modern technology on the field of aesthetics. (In this essay, I use the terms “modern” and “modernism” to refer to a set of overlapping discourses that attempt to produce and codify knowledge and
meaning in relationship to changing cultural practices, primarily in so-called “Western” society, from sometime in the latter half of the nineteenth century to roughly World War II. Understandably, this periodization is open to much debate.) Valéry’s (and, by extension, Benjamin’s) nod to progress, however, also serves as an exemplar of what is traditionally noted as a hallmark, if not an obsession, of the modernist period: the will to progress which seemingly drove both technological and social change.

The mere existence of such a tradition, however, doesn’t necessarily establish its validity, and the view of the modernist era as singularly focused on progress, as an inexorable march towards mechanization/fascism, does not (and should not) remain free from criticism. Indeed, it might be argued that perhaps this progressivist philosophy, based in an evolutionary model of change, has received somewhat undue attention (or insufficiently critical attention) from many scholars of the period; after all, every age certainly has its own reformers. Why, then, should the modernist period be so unfairly singled out for its interest in utopian progress? It is perhaps only through the lens of the sobering events which were to follow (World War II and global conflict, the reification through industrial production of immense economic differentials, the “postmodern” fragmentation of identity and the self) that the dystopian shadow side of modernity reveals itself, creating the kind of heightened chiaroscuro effect that makes modern ideals of progress stand out in such sharp contrast. As a result, conventional wisdom has often carried the day, to the point that the narrative of progress as the triumph of mechanization, the final conquest of form, has too frequently dominated the field for much of the twentieth century. More recently, however, interdisciplinary interventions in this conception of the period have begun to shift our perceptions of what we might understand as the effect(s) of progress as a discrete idea or concept.
Hillel Schwartz’s masterful essay, “Torque: The New Kinaesthetic of the Twentieth Century,” gathers together diverse strands from cultural history to weave a tapestry that tells the story of, both figuratively and literally, new movements. In doing so, the conventional wisdom regarding bodies and motion in the early twentieth century is turned on its head. Schwartz describes the changing kinaesthetic as one which emerges from both the physical core, the torso, as well as a spiritual core, as in the work of Delsarte. Schwartz quotes Delsarte’s Law of Correspondence as a distillation of his philosophy: “To each spiritual function responds a function of the body; to each grand function of the body corresponds a spiritual act” (71). The body responds to the spiritual core by moving from its own physical center, the torso. For Schwartz, then, this movement can be translated across a wide array of concerns, from handwriting to modern dance. By tracing the genealogy of movement and the new kinaesthetic back to Delsarte, Schwartz is able to locate the ghost in the machine, the unvoiced soul trapped by academic tradition in the increasingly mechanized body. The argument here, however, is that the conception of the body as a mechanical object has not supplanted other conceptions of the body; rather, they coexist, creating a tension and interplay that can be read as a metacritical vision of the relationship between the organic and the technological. Schwartz goes against the grain here, arguing for the change in movement and kinaesthetics as an ongoing dialectical process:

People have not begun to move like machines. Nor do they admire mechanical motion in others, except perhaps to applaud the patience and phenomenal physical control of those performers who imitate penny-arcade automata and repeat a stilted series of isolated movements extremely difficult to learn. If women, men and children these days experience themselves as off-balance, gawky, clumsy, stiff, they also share a vision and experience of flowing movement spiraling outward from a soulful center. (108)

For Schwartz, then, the traditional depiction of the modernist approach to movement has been an imbalanced one. Consequently, a more complete understanding of movement and the meaning of
the new kinaesthetic can only be achieved through this dialectical relationship, one which perhaps has yet to achieve meaningful synthesis.

This comparative process, however, increasingly appears to have been key to the modern audience’s apprehension of the new aesthetic products being placed before them by the technological innovations of moving pictures. Charles Musser argues for a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between theater, film, and the visual arts as a means of reckoning with audience reception of these aesthetic products. For him, a full understanding of how such audiences aesthetically constructed the texts made available to them necessitates a clear depiction of how the formal strategies of such texts’ presentations were interdependent on one another. The audience viewing early moving pictures, he argues, would have understood those images through an essentially pictorial lens, likening them, even down to their ornate frames, to the paintings or photographs they’d seen, evaluating them in those terms. Moreover, the drawing of such aesthetic parallels wasn’t strictly confined to the two-dimensional surface of the canvas or the photograph. The theatrical tradition of the *tableau vivant*, actors striking static poses to illustrate some dramatic scene, would also have provided a possible point of reference for the audience attending the moving picture show. Thus, the audience was able, through comparison, to attempt their own aesthetic evaluation based on a complicated matrix of representations available to them as entertainments. Like Schwartz, then, Musser structures his argument around a dialectic. Here, that dialectic is proposed as an essential component of spectatorship:

If cinema produced, as Tom Gunning has suggested, an aesthetic of astonishment, it also offered an aesthetic of discernment. Although commercial considerations generally motivated and shaped these discourses in the popular realm, this discrimination between and among artworks/cultural texts often involved a working through of issues surrounding reproducibility, emergent consumerism, and evaluative judgment that capitalism required of those active in the marketplace. (6)
Aesthetics in the modern period, then, can only ever really be understood as an inherently interdisciplinary field, one in which visual literacy was increasingly a case of dialectical evaluation, a process of juxtaposing an understanding of one form or medium against the comprehension of another.

Central to this understanding of the emergent moving pictures, then, is the distinction they created between themselves and other visual representations. They were pictures, yes, and to be understood pictorially, but they were also moving, and the quality of movement and how they achieved that quality, was essential to the audience’s perception of them. As Nancy Mowll Mathews writes, “It was inevitable that the sensations of travel, speed, and change would become interwoven in still and moving representations of motion in this period” (2). Once the kinaesthetic genie was out of the bottle, it would no longer be contained. The sensations of movement, and the associations which such sensations evoked, necessarily began to serve as primary factors through which the burgeoning aesthetic of film could be understood in relationship to other art forms prevalent in the modern period.

Somewhat ironically, these very factors are perhaps most pronounced when juxtaposed with the modernist concept of the “moment,” the phenomenological experience of strong sensation mediated by its temporal ephemerality, its necessarily transient nature. This conception of the “moment” is central to Jean Epstein’s theorization of photogénie, what Leo Charney describes as “fleeting fragments of experience that provide pleasure in ways that the viewer cannot describe verbally or rationalize cognitively” (285). Epstein positions the experience of the fragmentary moment, rather than a steady sense of forward momentum, as the essential element of film art. When understood as central to the aesthetics of film, the intermittent pleasures derived from these moments complicate our notion of modernist cultural forms as juggernauts of
progress, moving inevitably forward; if we are to take such theorists as Epstein at their word, the emergent (and immensely popular) form of moving pictures was structured precisely around a celebration of the moment, a concept that is, if not at odds with a rhetoric of progress, certainly in tension with it.

Film, then, emerges in this period as a contact zone in which modernist ideas regarding the relationship between stasis and dynamism can play themselves out on the screen. The audience’s understanding and appreciation of motion pictures, however, already arguably informed by preexisting relationships to other art forms and media, cannot be simply reduced to a valorization of technology and mechanization as progressive, utopian forces. Rather, the emergence of new technologies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries allowed for the simultaneous expression of multiple and contradictory impulses, impulses that have too often been regularized under the single rubric of “progress.” It seems possible, then, that just as our understanding of aesthetic engagement in the modernist period can be better understood as an interdisciplinary, dialectical process, so too can our conceptions of progress be more nuanced when held in tension with circulating theories about the power of the “moment.”

Works Cited

“Christ, I Miss the Cold War”: James Bond, 9/11, and Casino Royale

Mark Bernard

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In a thought-provoking essay published in 2003, Jim Leach speculates about the future of the James Bond franchise in a post-9/11 world. Citing comments by Slavoj Žižek that conflate the image of Osama Bin Laden with that of legendary Bond super villain Ernst Stavro Blofeld, Leach laments that “the new situation” created by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 “would be explained and addressed according to the old scenarios” (249). Leach’s claims are apparently substantiated by his analysis of the September 2002 issue of Vanity Fair in which “a long photo-essay commemorating the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks” is immediately followed by an article previewing Die Another Day, the latest Bond film (257). As Leach puts it, “The reader thus turns the page from images of New York enveloped in smoke from the collapse of the WTC towers to images of the production of the latest film in which Bond saves the world”
Pointing out that Halle Berry’s wardrobe in the film is an obvious homage to Ursula Andress’s from the first Bond movie, Leach clinches his point: Bond, even after the events of 9/11, will continue to “save” the Free World using the same techniques and the same style that he always did. Thus, old scenarios are used to frame and “deal with” new situations.

However, Leach acknowledges the possibility that in a post-9/11 world, things may not remain so simple, claiming, “While Bond’s enduring popularity depends on the appeal of imaginary solutions to real problems, the terrorist attacks of September 11, and the subsequent critical and political responses, expose the complexity of the relations between the imaginary and the real in the contemporary cultural environment” (257). This complexity – or, more accurately stated, confusion – can be found in what I would argue is the first “true” post-9/11 Bond film, *Casino Royale*, directed by Martin Campbell and released in 2006, the year that Hollywood finally seemed ready to “deal with” the events of 9/11 by releasing a spate of films – *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006), for example – about the infamous day’s events.

On the surface, *Casino Royale* is, very purposely, different from previous Bond outings in two ways: it ignores all the films that came before and begins anew, with a young Bond (Daniel Craig) who has only recently obtained “double-0” status and has not yet polished his trademark debonair demeanor, and it eschews, for the most part, the gimmicks of the earlier films in favor of a more “realistic” treatment of Bond’s early career. However, the film’s “realism” should not lead one to believe that it deals with the current global, political climate in any “new” or interrogatory ways. *Casino Royale* still relies upon old models of understanding global politics or, as Leach would put it, imaginary solutions (superhuman secret agents, etc.) to real problems (the arms race, war profiteering, the unequal distribution of goods around the
globe, etc.), but the film infuses these imaginary solutions with a “realism” that seems to justify and validate the hard-nosed, paranoid, and bellicose tactics that the United States and its allies are utilizing in the “war on terror.”

Many critics and commentators enthusiastically embraced this new, more “realistic” Bond, and the critical response to *Casino Royale* was generally positive. For example, Sean Burns, writing for the *Philadelphia Weekly*, praises, “[T]his bruising, stripped-down prequel deliberately avoids the bloated campiness that bogged down those desultory Pierce Brosnan efforts of recent years” (Burns). According to Burns, the film delivers an image of Bond that “feels a lot leaner and a good deal meaner than we’ve come to expect from the series in recent decades” (Burns). Tom Charity, critic for CNN.com, also admires this “utilitarian, back-to-basics Bond” who exhibits “psychological depth” and “bleeds and bruises” unlike the seemingly indestructible Bonds of past films (Charity). Along these lines, critic Philip French praises the makers of *Casino Royale* for infusing the film’s violence with more “realism” and making Bond a more vulnerable character: “the violence is more realistic and not accompanied by Monty Norman’s famous theme music. There is a lot of blood” (French). Similarly, Sean Burns admires how the film’s “violence is messy and unpleasant – lots of grappling close-quarter pummelings during which the sound design amplifies every crunching bone” (Burns).

*Casino Royale*’s depiction of Bond doling out, as Burns describes it, “messy and unpleasant” violence in order to protect the Free World may suggest that the film somehow questions the United States’s and Britain’s militaristic approach to global politics. After all, Bond is a figure who, with his British origins and American action-hero appeal, perfectly personifies a combination of Tony Blair’s and George W. Bush’s hardnosed tactics in the “War on Terror.” Unfortunately, an interrogation of these tactics does not take place. Instead, the film
fails to deal with global politics post-9/11 in any significant ways and falls into the pattern of using old, Cold War-era models as a way to frame and think through – or, rather, not think through – contemporary situations. For example, Le Chiffre, the villain of Ian Fleming’s original novel *Casino Royale*, is “a bagman for the Soviet terror organization Smersh” (French), whereas in the film, he (played by Mads Mikkelsen) is transformed, in the most superficial and perfunctory way, into a “private banker to the world’s terrorists” who used his knowledge of the events of 9/11 to manipulate the stock market.

Further, the “realistic” violence of the film and the harsh treatment of Bond reanimate this old “Cold War” model with a feeling of victimhood on the part of the United States, post-9/11. Jonathan Schell, in “Too Late for Empire,” his scathing critique of American imperialism, argues that the United States’ imperialistic tendencies have often come from a state of imagined impotence: “Why, if the United States has had no peer in wealth and weaponry, has it for more than a half-century been persistently, incurably complaining of weakness, paralysis, even impotence?” (18). Predictably, this feeling of victimhood on the part of the United States was exacerbated by the events of 9/11 when, according to Tom Engelhardt, “one of the most common words over those days [following 9/11] in the *Times* and elsewhere was ‘vulnerable’ (or as a *Times* piece put it, ‘nowhere was safe’)” (17).

This perceived victimhood and powerlessness of the United States can be seen in the revamped Bond of *Casino Royale*. Sean Burns describes him as “the brutish, brokenhearted 007 for our times, appropriately tougher and sadder than the preceding incarnations” (Burns). I would argue that this “sadness” comes both from existing in a destabilized, post-9/11 world and from the United States’ perceived victimhood and that the “toughness” is what the film argues, through its usage of “realistic” violence, is required of foreign policy in these perilous times.
Additionally, this “toughness” is reinforced by falling back on old “Cold War” modes of thinking. For example, at the conclusion of the film, an emotionally wounded Bond, who has been betrayed by a woman with whom he had fallen in love, has a brief, but illuminating exchange with M (Judi Dench), one of his commanding officers:

M: You don’t trust anyone, do you, James?
BOND: No.
M: Good. Then you’ve learned your lesson.

For the audience, the lesson is clear: Cold War-style paranoia is the only tenable response to the current global political situation that has become increasingly violent, hostile, and perilous, especially – apparently – for white Westerners, considering that the audience sees no other person besides Bond endure torture in the film.

Jim Leach points out that self-reflexivity is one of the hallmarks of the Bond films (250), and it could be argued that Casino Royale is not significantly different from previous Bond films because of its self-reflexivity (there are plenty of in-jokes to keep fans of the Bond franchise entertained). However, I would argue that Casino Royale’s self-reflexivity and in-jokes serve to highlight the over-the-top campiness of previous Bond films and to foreground the “seriousness” of this one. For instance, when Bond and Vesper Lynd (Eva Green) embark on their mission to take down Le Chiffre, Bond teasingly informs Vesper that her codename for the mission will be “Mrs. Broadchest,” an obvious joke on the sexual and seductive names of past Bond femme fatales like Honey Ryder and Pussy Galore. Vesper objects, and the two share a laugh over the joke that both develops the emotional bond between the two characters and establishes their
difference – a “serious” difference – from past Bond characters, a distinction on which the filmmakers attempt to capitalize when Vesper eventually breaks Bond’s heart by betraying him.

Another example of how self-reflexivity works to set Casino Royale apart from other Bond films is during the torture sequence. After having Bond stripped and tied to a chair, Le Chiffre remarks, “You know, I never understood all these elaborate tortures. It’s the simplest thing to cause more pain than a man can possibly endure” and proceeds to whip Bond’s genitals with a knotted rope. Le Chiffre’s comments on more “elaborate tortures” is obviously meant to call to mind the Rube Goldberg torture devices of past Bond villains, both foregrounding the “silliness” of those tortures and reinforcing the “reality” of Le Chiffre’s low-tech torture and Bond’s (and, by extension, America’s and Britain’s) victimhood.

Casino Royale seems to prove both Leach’s statement that “old models” will continue to be used in order to understand new situations and his claim that the relationship between the real and the imaginary will grow more complex in a post-9/11 world. The relationship between the real and imaginary is certainly more complex in Casino Royale, but this complexity does not necessarily mean that the film makes a significant or progressive statement about the current global and political situation. Rather, the film attempts to infuse old, Cold War-based models of thinking about global politics with a “realism” and “seriousness” in order to give them a new vitality and legitimacy in order to posit the United States as victims and thus justify hard-nosed tactics in the ongoing “war on terrorism.” In one scene, M laments, “Christ, I miss the Cold War,” but paradoxically, Casino Royale is a testament to how the Cold War modes of thinking, and icons like James Bond, really never left us, but instead have disguised themselves under the veneer of “realism” and “seriousness” and continue to inform the ways in which we envision and conceptualize our current global and political situation.
Works Cited


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While simpleminded, it seems useful to ask: what is the attraction of “subversive” movies and media stars; how could fictional representations be subversive acts; how did contact with “subversive” movies become a politically radical gesture; why have “counterculture” audiences come to value “subversive” fictions? Work by Raymond Williams suggests that one way to answer questions like these is to consider, first, the degree to which we have become spectators of a world out there and, second, the way that industrial/post-industrial experience has channeled the expression of subjectivity into acts of consumption, to choices about what one watches and listens to, to decisions about what we value enough to bring into “private” space. His work provides a way to see that as a consequence of people being directed to engage in acts of “resistance” in the domain of consumption and taste-making, the “spectator-centered” approach to art and culture underlying Manny Farber’s cult criticism, Parker Tyler’s camp criticism, Andrew Sarris’s cult/camp criticism, and the non-aesthetic aesthetic of “evangelist” Jonas Mekas has, for a half century, been an attractive option for people seeking to have a “real” relationship to a world out there (Taylor 26, 109).  

Taking its cue from Williams’s insight that dislocated and disembodied industrial/post-industrial life has shaped us into spectators of a world out there, caught in an “unfinished,
transient, anxious relationship” with ourselves and others as we search and wait for the news from the outside that will create and confirm our identities, the essay proposes that spectator-centered visions of cultural resistance have, over the course of fifty years, led to the increasingly apolitical and disempowered pose of hipster counterculture (Raymond Williams on Television 13). That is, of course, a highly delimited thesis.

A comprehensive account of cultural and political resistance throughout the world would show that spectator-centered critiques are side shows. However, these safe forms of resistance have been given an inordinate amount of attention because they do not threaten the status quo. That attention makes it necessary to note that writing about fringe or popular media can be an act of cultural resistance but not a radical political act, and that resistance to what has been perceived as middlebrow taste and morality has actually enhanced corporate profits and engendered its own conformity. By conflating avant-garde aesthetics and avant-garde politics, by equating cultural commentary with political action, “subversive” representations and lifestyle choices have acquired increased significance, while for people shaped by and plugged into media culture, participation in actual social movements has come to seem increasingly foreign and remote, even suspect and inherently compromised.

**Media culture and apolitical cultural resistance**

Williams’s views about media culture, described in *Television: Technology and Cultural Forms* (1974) and elsewhere, evolve from his work on the “structure of feeling” embodied by various historically specific examples of modern drama (*Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* 19). They are also consonant with the foundational insights of the analysis that Guy Debord provides in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). For, like Williams’s emphasis on the modern experience of being shut off from the world out there, Debord begins his discussion of “societies dominated by
modern conditions of production” with the assessment: “Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudo-world that can only be looked at” (7; emphasis in original).

For Williams and Debord, the corollary to being cut off from a world out there is that people’s attention is directed to certain things (and away from others). Describing the way our attention gets focused on selected aspects of the world out there, Jonathan Crary notes that the cultural-technological components of modern life that fragment attention exist in a “reciprocal relationship to the rise of attentive norms and practices” (1). Confirming the work of Williams and Debord, Crary reminds us that people in media-saturated environments are shaped by “the disciplinary organization of labor, education, and mass consumption” (1-2).

These interlocking institutions not only frame our view of the world out there, the “picture” or “story” as broadcast to us is complete before we see it. Expressing a point made by Williams, Debord explains that the world out there is “a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned” (6). What is shown (and not shown) is beyond any individual’s control. As Debord puts it, the spectacle’s “sole message is: ‘What appears is good; what is good appears’” (9-10). Work such as Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media (Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, 1988) illustrates that fact by showing how the convergence of corporate ownership, massive bureaucracy, government interests, advertisers, and well placed private constituencies frame the world we are allowed and directed to see.

Because 24/7 coverage of sports, shopping, and entertainment news directs our attention to the next American Idol, for spectators watching the world, aspiration is channeled into being seen in the spotlight out there. If we can’t be in the spotlight, the next best thing is to have a connection to that experience, by watching and reifying the connection through purchases. By
comparison, given the convergence of forces that have gained increased control over what we see in the world, today a person could go a lifetime without hearing any news about collective political action and extra-parliamentary opposition (see Hall, Williams, Thompson). Institutional powers have learned from their “mistakes” in the 1960s; the only public protests that should be covered are ones fomented and orchestrated by the powers themselves. Anything else must be demonized, ridiculed, or censored. As a consequence, today there is little reason that a media culture person would aspire to participate, for example, in the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra MST), which Noam Chomsky has called “the world’s most important social movement” (Patel 205).

It is possible that prosaic political resistance is currently coalescing and increasing; while invisible in mainstream media, challenges posed and solutions created by environmental groups, peace activists, human rights supporters, and others are discussed in small press publications and on independent media programs like Democracy Now. At the same time, it is very possible that absorption in the spectacle of corporate media culture is also on the rise. “Free time” and “dead time” can be filled by immersion in commercial press offerings, video games, corporate film, music and television, opinions and images for consumption brought into private space through the web. Growing up and living in media culture, people’s knowledge increasingly consists of “information” that facilitates consumption, and personal identity is to a greater extent formed by the “labor” required to consume pleasurably and effectively. In this context, cultural products take on a special significance; sophistication and individuality depends on “staying one step ahead of the consuming crowd” (Frank 30).

Media culture amplifies the likelihood for and influence of apolitical cultural resistance. With corporate media regulating access to the world out there, rebellion against the status quo
through lifestyle and consumer choices is presented as the first, best, and only real option. Since these choices enhance rather than threaten corporate power and profit, they are publicized and promoted; given full coverage in all venues, these acts of “resistance” influence the choices of more and more individuals searching for a way to define themselves. In other words, in media culture, “mainstream cultural resistance” (note the oxymoron) is a hot commodity.

The complications of a spectator-centered vision of art and culture

Depictions of political action on independent media channels like submedia.tv can arguably amplify their effect. Yet it is worth remembering that fictional representations of resistance to the status quo, however that is defined, do not constitute acts of resistance. This consideration is especially pertinent when the representations increase corporate wealth. For instance, a film like Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, 1969) is still sometimes seen as an expression of “subversive currents” in American film and culture (Cagin 32). Yet with a budget under $500,000 and a box office over $60,000,000, it was made because Columbia president Stanley Schneider, his brother producer Bert Schneider, and director/studio executive Bob Rafaelson saw a way to follow up on the success they’d had with The Monkees, the faux rock group assembled for the TV show produced by Bert Schneider and Bob Rafaelson (see Cagin 48).

The logic behind green lighting Easy Rider gives lie to the notion that media stars can embody qualities that when seen will somehow foment dissent. At one time overshadowed by his father, studio era star Henry Fonda, and sister, Jane, by the time Easy Rider was pitched to Columbia, Peter Fonda had shown that he too was a bankable star: The Wild Angels (Roger Corman, 1966) was “the most successful low-budget film prior to Easy Rider,” with its $360,000 budget and $14,000,000 gross (Cagin 44). By 1968, Peter Fonda had also become an “icon for the ‘new generation,’” and so could be used to reach an audience that had, up to that point,
largely eluded the mainstream film industry (Cagin 37). So, far from being a threat to corporate media, Fonda’s “subversive” star image, which had emerged from his roles in *The Wild Angels* and *The Trip* (Roger Corman, 1967) and publicity material like his profile in *Esquire* (February 1968), is what made him useful to Columbia Pictures.

In addition, while Fonda might have envisioned *Easy Rider* as a defiant response to MPAA president Jack Valenti’s call for family-oriented films, the film does not offer a radical critique of the status quo (see Cagin 47). Instead, as a cultural product funded by corporate media and marketed for a profit, the film “succeeds” by portraying the counterculture’s failure to offer an alternative to mainstream values. The film’s conclusion, expressed by Wyatt/Captain America (Peter Fonda) that “we blew it,” presents a closed and complete “picture” of the counterculture as delusional and ineffectual. Created and consumed in a context that is entirely different from the essays and fiction that fuel internal debates in subcultures and social movements, *Easy Rider* was a boost for corporate America as a whole. As Mark Fortier notes, widely seen “representations of radical or subversive activity and thought on the stage [and screen], especially when ultimately overcome, contribute to the legitimacy and authority of the powers that be” (165).

Columbia produced *Easy Rider* to make money, Fonda’s star image facilitated studio profits, and the film shored up the status quo; such pedestrian observations would be unnecessary if a historically specific “spectator-centered vision of vanguard American art” had not emerged in the postwar years (Taylor 26). According to this vision, movies have value insofar as they give critics occasions to engage with artifacts that violate mainstream beliefs about great art, good taste, and proper morality; writing about these violations ostensibly confirms critics’ radical politics and distance from “an expanding culture of sameness” (Taylor 33). In the case of *Easy Rider*, even today the film is praised for its violation of highbrow aesthetics and middlebrow
morality. Hip critics note that its “violent and rude unmasking of latent impulses” leads to a “momentary triumph of revolutionary values” (Cagin 40-41). This type of “momentary triumph” has been and will continue to be supported by corporate media culture because it is in its interest to so. Safely confined within the domain of individual pleasure, perhaps particularly men’s, *Easy Rider* promises and even provides “orgasmic” release from the confines of industrial/post-industrial life. In corporate media culture, it’s a win-win situation; as the narrative and images are accessed again and again in various formats corporations benefit and people working and living in industrial/post-industrial society experience a liberating *feeling* of rebellion.

What Greg Taylor rightly terms a “spectator-centered vision of vanguard American art” has become so deeply ingrained in thinking and writing about film, media, and culture – and has been such a powerful influence on film and media makers who seek to win favor with audiences and critics – it is difficult to realize that this approach to art and culture has a particular history, logic, and agenda. Yet it does. In the postwar years Manny Farber, the pioneer of cult criticism, and Parker Tyler, who codified camp criticism, turned away from highbrow modernist art and started writing about movies because modernist art, especially the abstract expressionist painting of Jackson Pollock, had become sanctioned by American consumer culture and transformed into a commodity that the U.S. government funded and then exported throughout the world to exemplify the contrast between the vitality and freedom made possible by capitalism and the conformism required by communist states (Taylor 7-12; 19-29).

Then, as Taylor explains, in the 1960s Farber’s and Tyler’s spectator-centered vision of art and culture garnered “a wider audience of hipsters” (18). Transforming Farber’s approach into “a more accessible cultism of *breadth,*” Andrew Sarris marked out “a useable alternative culture within American cinema” by creating his own version of European auteur theory (Taylor
90, 87; emphasis in original). Following Farber’s implicitly highbrow approach, Sarris’s “cultist cataloging” of film directors “boosted his [own] vanguard authority” (Taylor 90, 89). Moreover, Sarris presented his “critical gesture as adequate and effective cultural provocation” (Taylor 92; emphasis in original). This move is significant, for as Taylor explains, in doing so “Sarris’s cultism . . . merges with camp,” which was and arguably continues to the “governing ethos” (95).

Even in the 1940s, camp criticism had been more intensely spectator-centered than cult. As Taylor points out, cult criticism is a matter of “oppositional connoisseurship”; cult critics become cool by demonstrating “the connoisseur’s talent in finding the prized object or fragment” (16). By comparison, “the critical camp spectator revels in the interpretation/transformation process while often placing little stake in the initial selection of mass objects” (Taylor 16; emphasis in original). Then, in the 1960s, Jonas Mekas, a “self-proclaimed prophet of the counterculture and ardent defender of self-liberation,” extended the logic of camp criticism to the point that “valuative criticism” was set aside completely (Taylor 111, 112). The films that he and other new camp critics championed “eschewed aesthetic and moral standards and even technical competence in favor of complete freedom” (Taylor 115). As Taylor explains, “No one really cared whether these new films were any good, so long as they were outrageous enough to call attention to their devoted followers” (115; emphasis in original). The films that most clearly satisfied this non-aesthetic aesthetic criterion are worth noting, for they include movies valued today, “Night of the Living Dead (1968), El Topo (1970), Pink Flamingos (1973), Eraserhead (1978), and of course The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975)” (Taylor 119).

The elitist/slumming logic of cult and camp criticism is pertinent because it has also shaped cultural studies. Stating that point concisely, Taylor explains that today’s “highbrow interest in pop culture is still very much driven by the vanguard fascination with microlevel
resistance to perceived high culture and middlebrow hegemony” (153). The spectator-centered vision of cultural resistance has, of course, provided a basis for considering material that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. However, more than fifty years into the regime, the drawbacks are also becoming apparent.

One problem can be traced to cult/camp criticism’s agenda of demonstrating “creativity within the constricting bounds of consumerism” (Taylor 48). As Taylor notes, “Farber’s cultism offered itself as a countergesture for savvy hipsters,” and that at the beginning of his career “Tyler took movies even less seriously than Farber did [for] he openly regarded them as material for his own creative, psychological-mythic reverie” (48, 51). In other words, cult/camp criticism is an intense form of consumption, one that allows a privileged consumer to demonstrate street cred. While there is a democratic dimension to the cult/camp approach, for any bit of popular culture can be selected for analysis, the one-upmanship involved in finding increasingly obscure, offensive, outrageous, and thus “authentic” material makes spectator-centered criticism an elitist venture. In addition, like other forms of commodity consumption, you are what you eat; the purpose of watching, writing about, and knowing the object, with its value determined by elitist taste-makers, is to enhance one’s own cultural capital.

In the mid-twentieth century, the cult/camp spectator-centered vision of art might have felt empowering, for in this cultural moment the artist was dethroned and the audience acquired agency (see Taylor 94, 98). However, the cult/camp approach – of sifting through mass culture to find preserved fragments of authentic lived experience and of digging beneath formulaic surfaces to locate inadvertent and thus authentic complexity (see Taylor 73) – has been a depoliticized and thus disempowered counterculture “gesture” from the outset. For example, Norman Mailer’s deeply fraught 1957 essay, “The White Negro,” announced that “the Hipster, an ‘American
existentialist’ whose tastes for jazz, sex, drugs, and the slang and mores of black society constituted the best means of resisting the encroachments of Cold War oppression” (Frank 12). Yet this process, in which privileged Americans poached from “illegitimate” culture, was not meant to lead to greater social understanding or a change in the world out there. Instead, these acts of “resistance” were little more than experiences of intensely pleasurable consumption. As Mailer explains, the hipster “exists for ever-more-intense sensation, for immediate gratification, for ‘an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it’” (Frank 12). Insisting on and disavowing their privileged position, critics like Farber, Tyler, Sarris, and Mekas embraced lowbrow movies with the flamboyant confidence expressed by Mailer, for they believed they had discovered and secured a liberated identity by rejecting highbrow art and middlebrow morality.

While Mailer and hipsters of his era were able to access a new “resistant” identity as they bluffed their way through shoddy cultural politics, by now the hipster mode is visibly an “artificial appropriation of different styles from different eras” (Haddow 2). Today’s “radical” choices appear to be reiterations of the “radical” choices people in corporate media culture have made since the postwar period. A keen awareness of culture substitutes for an awareness of social and political realities; lifestyle choices are seen as political statements; beliefs, opinions, and statements about the world out there become the field of activity, while political action is seen as something remote. Today’s hipster subculture seems to mirror the “shallowness of mainstream society” (Haddow 4) because mainstream media is by now geared to profit from consumers’ “radical” gesture of engaging (formerly) lowbrow culture.

With highbrow art, middlebrow taste, and conventional morality pushed to the sidelines long ago, the “radical” gesture of slumming it is now an empty gesture. As a consequence, an “odd dance of self-identity” has replaced the confident belief of the Cold War hipsters that a
“radical” identity would result from consuming lowbrow culture; hipsters now argue that “it’s a defining trait of the hipster to deny membership in hipsterdom” (Haddow 4, 9). Yet corporate media society continues to direct us to acts of “resistance” as they have been defined by the apolitical counterculture. Decades of a spectator-centered approach to culture have trained audiences to see the “surface vitality, masculine strength, [and] psychomythological depth” (Taylor 73) of lowbrow movies as a way to escape conformity and authority; the entertainment industry continues to profit by churning out movies made for and marketed to cult/camp audiences. With decades of cult/camp criticism framing commentary and connoisseurship as acts of cultural “resistance,” we are easily directed to the internet as something that provides us with another opportunity to make “political” statements. Of course, corporate media society benefits from our time on line: we are enticed to consume more products and our increased physical isolation and use of corporate media’s one-sided form of “communication” effectively reduces the likelihood that we will forge connections and maintain links with other people. In this environment, the once empowering spectator-centered vision of resistance not only fails to provide a liberating experience of rebellion, its emphasis on watching, listening, shifting through cultural debris, and waiting for something good to come along can be decidedly disempowering.

**Corporate media culture: a dramatized society shaped by the industrial revolution**

The sense of being “unable to create any new meaning” (Haddow 4) is not unique to hipster subculture but instead seems largely indicative of corporate media culture as a whole. Similarly, the curious combination of (a) our intense engagement with representations and (b) overriding sense that political action is something done by someone else out there is not just a result of postwar cult/camp criticism. Instead, our attentive but isolated way of living also arises from what Raymond Williams describes as “two apparently paradoxical yet deeply connected
tendencies of modern urban industrial living: on the one hand mobility, on the other the more apparently self-sufficient family home” (Television: Technology and Cultural Form 20).

Williams provides an especially succinct analysis of industrialization’s effects in “Drama in a Dramatised Society,” an essay that he first presented as his inaugural lecture at Cambridge in 1974. In the piece, Williams proposes that the “specific vocabulary of the dramatic mode” – scenario, situation, actors, performances, roles, images, and so on – has become the principal basis for many people’s understanding of themselves and the world (Raymond Williams on Television 8). What some might find surprising is that Williams argues that this vocabulary is not specific to what we now describe as media culture but instead is a way of experiencing the world that had coalesced in the late nineteenth century to the point that it visibly shaped the work of Ibsen, Chekhov, and others. Noting that “slice of life” representations were “once a project of naturalist drama,” Williams shows why their specific details are telling (Raymond Williams on Television 5). As he explains, in naturalist theatre productions in the 1880s and 1890s, the room on stage was not just where important things happened it was where “news from a shut-off outside world” arrived (Raymond Williams on Television 12). In this setting, “the voices were no longer speaking to or at one another”; instead “no individual ever quite finished what he had begun to say, but intersecting, being intersected by the words of others, casual and distracted, [the] words in their turn [were] unfinished” (12). This is significant. As Williams points out: this weaving of voices . . . is by now so normal . . . that it can be heard, any night, in a television serial, and this is not just imitation. It is a way of speaking and listening, a specific rhythm of a particular consciousness; in the end a form of unfinished, transient, anxious relationship, which is there on the stage or in the text but which is also,
pervasively, a structure of feeling in a precise contemporary world, in a period of history which has that familiar and complex transience. *(Raymond Williams on Television 12-13)*

Thus, as if echoing the writing and staging conventions of naturalist theatre productions that featured simulated “natural” behavior, today radios, TVs, computers, and smart phones feature familiar but transient fragments of voices and images, meaningful but fleeting signs of casual but distracted (and anxious) moments of speaking and listening.

Equally important, whether delivered by broadcasters or networking sites, spectators now have constant access to “drama” created “out there” in studios or on location, all existing on a spectrum of crafted and quotidian performances enacted on the public stage and in the public eye. From the beginning of the twentieth century forward, watching and listening to other people perform is no longer an occasional experience but instead something experienced and consumed on a constant and continual basis. As Williams notes, “In earlier periods, drama was important at a festival, in a season, or as a conscious journey to the theatre. . . . What we have now is drama as habitual experience: more in a week, in many cases, than most humans beings would previously have seen in a lifetime” *(Raymond Williams on Television 4).* As a consequence, immersion in “the flow of action and acting, of representation and performance” is now a part of everyday life, as people have developed “a need for images, for representations, of what living is now like, for this kind of person and that, in this situation and place and that” *(Raymond Williams on Television 5, 6).*

Williams’s observations about dramatized society not only echo the analysis in Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, they are also best understood in relation to Jacques Derrida’s contrast between speech and writing in *Of Grammatology* (1967) and William J. Ong’s reflections on media culture in *The Presence of the Word* (1967). For example, Ong came to see parallels
between media culture and earlier oral societies. One of the most salient connections is that in both instances people tend to embed “their thoughts in stories” (Crain 138). In an oral culture, or one that uses pictures, music, and spoken/sung words to convey meaning, ideas are preserved by “‘think[ing] memorable thoughts,’ whose zing insures their transmission”; similarly, when the spoken rather than written word is primary, opponents “in struggle are more memorable than calm and abstract investigations” (Crain 138). In societies that depend on talking and listening rather than reading and writing, “cliché and stereotype” are important “and redundancy is an asset that helps an audience follow a complex argument” (138).

Williams proposed that to understand people’s experience in a media society, we need to consider the social and material changes brought on by the industrial revolution. Industrialization created urban centers and as a consequence communities no longer consisted of people living and working together in one shared environment. Instead, they came to depend on people being “joined together through transportation and communication systems” (Spigel xxi). The transition to industrialized society also led to “an increased emphasis on the ideology of privacy” (Spigel xxi), which emerged from people’s experience of being under surveillance on the job and off. Williams coined the term “mobile privatization” to describe people’s experience of “geographic mobility (realized through technologies of transportation and communication) and privatization (realized through domestic architecture and community planning)” (Television: Technology and Cultural Form 20; Spigel xxi). The structural change of people being increasingly dispersed in and separated by distances between home and work “created both the need and the form of a new kind of ‘communication’: news from ‘outside,’ from otherwise inaccessible sources” (Television: Technology and Cultural Form 21).
For Williams, the structure of that new form of “communication” was reflected in the conventions of nineteenth-century naturalist theatre, for in these productions “the centre of dramatic interest was now for the first time the family home, but men and women stared from its windows, or waited anxiously for messages, to learn about forces, ‘out there,’ which would determine the conditions of their lives” (Television: Technology and Cultural Form 21). He saw the rapid expansion of radio broadcasting in the 1920s as additional evidence that “the tension between mobility and privatization” had led to a new form of “communication” that involved isolated individuals attentive to news from the outside (Spigel xxii). Finding that same form of “communication” underlying television broadcasting, Williams writes: “There is a direct cultural continuity, it seems to me, from those enclosed rooms, enclosed and lighted framed rooms, to the rooms in which we watch the framed images of television: at home, in our own lives, but needing to watch what is happening, as we say, ‘out there’” (Raymond Williams on Television 6).

In other words, television watching is another iteration of the “communication” form dramatized in the naturalist stage productions of the 1880s and 1890s. More recently, cell phones and the internet have become woven into the experience of searching and waiting for the news that will create a connection to people and events in the distance, and make up for lost physical intimacy and the emptiness of wage labor. What unites these cultural forms is the underlying structure of industrial/post-industrial life, which sets up the need and the way for dislocated, disembodied subjects to congeal for a moment by experiencing an “unfinished, transient, anxious relationship” with “characters” and “stories” outside of themselves (Raymond Williams on Television 13).

The connection that Williams makes between television’s and naturalist theatre’s enclosed, lighted, and framed images provides a way to see that the experience of separation and felt need for continual attentiveness to the world from which one is separated is not so much the
result of electronic media but instead arises from the experience of living in an industrialized society, at a distance from other members of a community, a condition that is ostensibly offset by the mobility made possible by technology but in fact is exacerbated by the internal mobility and adaptability required by industrial/post-industrial organization (see *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* 20). A way to understand Williams’s insight into the experience of separation integral to modern industrial/post-industrial subjectivity is to consider William Rothman’s view that movies (mediated scenarios) can create connections for people who feel separated from the outside world. He proposes that encountering human action that is there-but-not-there gives concrete form to the modern experience of spatial-temporal “displacement” and confirms that “our way of feeling connected with the world is not so much to look at it as to look **out** at it, as if from behind the self” (323).

While stories from out there might provide a (momentary) sense of connection, the news that we search and wait for is programmed by others. As Walter Benjamin would note, sounds and images are not delivered as material for “free-floating contemplation” (226). Instead, corporate captioning and professional commentary guide interpretations on the scenarios staged in the distance. Deeply ambivalent about mechanical reproductions, Benjamin understood that they allow “contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” and, at the very same time, make it possible for the (fascist) state to press new media forms “into the production of ritual values” (223, 241). Confirming that idea, Williams finds that the new form of “communication” dramatized in naturalist theatre signaled the transition to a society in which public figures and their audiences saw themselves as “characters” challenged by “stories” of tragedy, catastrophe, and disaster; in this one-sided and thus specious form of communication, spectators came to see the world around them in terms of “contests” between opponents locked
in “epic” battles (see *Raymond Williams on Television* 8). In Williams’s view, with complex ideas embedded in formulaic stories, and conflicting evidentiary claims transformed into exciting struggles between opposing characters, the conventions and the technology that have made it possible for people in industrial societies to be interested in events beyond the confines of their lighted rooms have also become the basis for a systematically and increasingly distorted dramatization of consumption and political life (see *Raymond Williams on Television* 6-7).

“Subversive” stars and movies in a dramatized and hipster-inflected society

The irresolvable problem that “stories” in a dramatized society are a means of connection to others and a primary source of alienation and disconnection plays itself out our engagement with movies and media stars. Given the corporate nature of the entertainment business, media stars are like other public figures in the age of simulated action, mechanical reproduction, and electronic inter-textuality: they not only illuminate lived experience, their variously crafted performances on the public stage also function as a continually regenerating source for what Williams would call “idle dreaming and vicarious spectacle; the simultaneous satisfaction of sloth and appetite; distraction from distraction by distraction.” (*Raymond Williams on Television* 5). As “characters” in “scenarios,” media stars are a corporate commodity that can be packaged and repackaged. They provide “distraction from distraction by distraction” when we watch them in films and see them on television, listen to their interviews and visit their fan websites.

Publications about media stars offer yet another venue for “idle dreaming and vicarious spectacle.” For example, the 30 November 2009 issue of *People Magazine* taps into that need (created by industrialized society) through its cover design, which features a picture of Johnny Depp and the caption, “Johnny Depp, Sexiest Man Alive!” Consumers are encouraged to let their “idle dreaming” about Depp lead to more “distraction from distraction by distraction,” for they
are told that Depp has now joined the “elite club of two-time SMA title holders (only Brad Pitt and George Clooney have matched the feat)” (80). The eleven pictures of Depp that fill the five-page “article” replicate the visual spectacle of Depp’s screen appearances. The editorial decision to list the name of the photographer but not the writer reflects the reality that “reading” in media culture involves attention to images with captions and it gives priority to the images that offer the opportunity for “idle dreaming.” Filling a particular niche by providing G rated images of Depp and other beautiful bodies People magazine caters to spectators with only enough free time and disposable income to buy posters, movie tickets, and other low end commodities.

While one would expect that commercial publications mobilize rather than comment on media stars’ fetishistic place in commodity culture, it is worth noting that academic presses also publish work designed to circulate easily in dramatized, corporate media society. For example, in Rutgers’s Johnny Depp Starts Here, Murray Pomerance’s “extended riff” on Depp celebrates his very personal “idle dreaming” about the star (13). As if echoing People magazine, Pomerance’s exploration of what he terms “my Johnny Depp” features various vignettes of a “story” about a completely “unique” individual (14). Interestingly, while Pomerance argues that his Johnny Depp is “so peculiar and so vitally interesting [because] he is ungraspable,” Pomerance acknowledges that studio publicity has presented Depp as “a colossal riddle” (10, 104). Like fans lost in “idle dreaming” as they flip through the pages of People magazine, Pomerance is not concerned that the star persona he discovers is the one circulated by corporate publicity. Like “stories” about stars in mainstream press, academic star studies often implicitly appeal to consumers’ interest in “vicarious spectacle.” While some emphasize industry practices and films’ relationships with consumers (see Smoodin 2-4), there is a limited market for material about “the phony spell of a commodity [that arises from] the cult of the movie star” (Benjamin 231).
Given the influence of cult/camp criticism, “subversive” media stars are given a lot of press in a corporate media culture that makes us want to connect with something “authentic” outside ourselves. This desire has, for example, led to scores of books on stars like Mae West and James Dean. It has also led to interest in star directors who have been able to sell themselves and their films as “subversive.” Directors like Quentin Tarantino and Eli Roth have become “subversive” media stars by embodying the hipster image that combines claims of highbrow creative authorship with a slumming embrace of lowbrow forms (see Bernard, “The ‘DVD Revolution’” 20-25).

For example, in an interview on Fox News timed to accompany the DVD release of his 2006 film Hostel, Eli Roth compared his work to the “rich tradition of horror films that . . . are critical of the United States’s military policies” (Bernard, “Hostel-ity Toward Whiteness” 3). However, in a more candid moment in the interview featured on the Hostel DVD, Roth explains that he approached the film knowing that if it could “synch up with the fears of the moment,” it would be a financial success (quoted in Bernard, “Hostel-ity Toward Whiteness” 10). Thus, as Mark Bernard explains, Roth’s film “is not necessarily interrogating United States’s geopolitical policies [but instead is] pulling images from the headlines to draw an audience and to create a successful film” (“Hostel-ity Toward Whiteness” 10-11). Moreover, as Bernard’s analysis of the two Hostel films shows, Roth’s work supports rather than subverts U.S. military interventions around the globe by playing on Americans’ fear that “American bodies [are] vulnerable and under severe attack” (“Hostel-ity Toward Whiteness” 14).

While Roth’s work is in reality far from a critique of the status quo, there are good reasons that he and others would market it as having an edgy, “subversive” message. As Bernard notes, “The marketing and promotion of Roth’s Hostel films” is modeled on strategies that
coalesced in the 1990s when star directors became celebrities used by corporate media to sell product in the increasingly important home theatre market (“The ‘DVD Revolution’” 21). Outlining the way Roth so easily acquired the image of a “confrontational and uncompromising” auteur, Bernard points out that the marketing campaign designed by Lionsgate not only featured the challenging and “illicit nature” of Roth’s films, Roth also adeptly “found a fitting mentor in the media-and-marketing-savvy [Quentin] Tarantino, who acted as an executive producer on the films” (“The ‘DVD Revolution’” 22, 21).

Bernard highlights the way Lionsgate promoted Roth’s films by emphasizing, on the one hand, their “disturbing, scary, and violent” aspects, all “familiar elements of exploitation cinema,” and, on the other, the idea that audiences are “encountering an ‘artistic’ vision of a true auteur when they watch films like Hostel” (“The ‘DVD Revolution’” 23). He points out that this dual-focused strategy helped to create Roth’s public image as a “renegade” auteur (“The ‘DVD Revolution’” 24). One way to assess the media star image that emerged from that strategy is to see that, like Tarantino before him, Roth has been able to sell the hipster’s apolitical “gesture” as a cultural and even political act of resistance – despite the fact that it is an elitist, aesthetic pose that signals the artistic/critical ability to escape middlebrow by engaging in the (oxymoronic) activity of consuming culture in a way that gives the consumer freedom from consumer culture.

The reason exploitation films by directors like Roth and Tarantino could and would be marketed as “subversive” can also be traced to the fact that, as the earlier, brief example of Easy Rider begins to suggest, this commodity has attracted allegedly counterculture audiences for decades. Today’s aggressive promotion of media products like Roth’s torture-porn films that seem to express “freedom from repressive moral standards . . . taste conventions and aesthetic niceties” (Taylor 112), is somewhat related to the criticism of Manny Farber and Parker Tyler,
but it is grounded especially in the “radical” non-aesthetic aesthetic formulated by camp critic Jonas Mekas, who riffed on Parker Tyler’s writings to develop an “anything goes” approach to filmmaking and film criticism (Taylor 99). Beginning with the “sassy youth [and] moral anarchism” of a film like *Pull My Daisy* (Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, 1958), new camp filmmakers “profited nicely from the dubious reputation . . . of Underground movies” (Taylor 114, 116). Taylor points out that the new camp non-aesthetic downplayed Tyler’s and Farber’s interest in “creative transmutation and deeper cultural insight” to the point that “hipness could itself emerge as a prime vanguard credential” (Taylor 118). In this exceedingly “spectator-friendly” context, “subversive” avant-garde films could be “accessible and, potentially, popular” (Taylor 118, 116). Directors, and by extension their audiences, could “court notoriety and [even] material success” by promoting themselves as advocates of a free-wheeling critique of anything that restrained “orgasmic” individual experience (Taylor 116).

Today, directors like Roth and Tarantino are hot commodities because their films seem to contain “subversive” messages. Still, despite the Mailer-like bluster, cult/camp criticism – especially when done by directors about their own work – is just more of the same spectator-centered vision of art and culture that has shaped the apolitical pose of hipster culture for half a century. Well publicized films and/or media stars might challenge social norms but not corporate power. They can exist as a locus of contention, but to imagine that a movie or celebrity promoted by the culture industry is somehow subversive in and of itself is contra-definitional. Even the seemingly challenging attributes of fiction films and media stars are hardly subversive, for the presence of any detail that is threatening to transnational capitalism would preclude financial success and stardom. Publicity machines do not propagate subversion, and the high visibility of
“subversive” films and media stars should be our first and last clue that they reflect and sustain corporate interests.

By now, the thoroughgoing commercialization of cultural resistance seems to cut both ways. On the one hand, it makes the signs of “subversive” behavior marketable to more and more people. On the other, it makes it less and less attractive to repeat the now empty gesture that “authentic” identity is secured through contact with lowbrow cultural products. With hipster “radicalism” exhausted, some people will likely turn even more desperately to fictional “stories” and “characters” in a search for news that “authentic” identity and experience exists somewhere out there. At the same time, the obvious commercialization of hip representations will likely encourage at least some people to stop “reading” corporate messages in the hope of finding hope. With the “subversive” potential of corporate media representations an increasingly threadbare fiction, there could be an increased impetus to see daily life as the domain for acts of resistance.

Endnotes
1. Beckett Warren contributed to this essay, which depends on ideas and phrases lifted from our original co-authored piece, email correspondence, and conversations.
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Forum Editors:
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The forum takes up: points raised in the anthology’s opening by Julian Stringer and Thomas Schatz; considerations outlined in the first section, Industry Matters, by Steve Neale, Jon Lewis, and Warren Buckland; views expressed by Michael Allen, Geoff King, and Peter Krämer in the section on Exploring Spectacle; factors noted in the third section, Establishing Cultural Status, by Gillian Roberts, and Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire; and perspectives offered by Andrew Willis in the final section, The Blockbuster in the International Frame.

Forum Essays: Part I

Darin D. Kerr, “‘You’re Gonna Need a Bigger Boat’: Expanding the Boundaries of Critical Practice”

Sudipto Sanyal, “Beyond the Hollywood Blockbuster: Theorizing a Culturally-Specific Genre Studies Practice”

Kevan A. Feshami, “Cinema Studies Outside the Art/Commerce Binary”

Justin Philpot, “At the Intersection of Commerce and Culture: The Movie Blockbuster”

Christian Remse, “The Cultural Space of Movie Blockbusters”

Forum Essays: Part II

Bryan McGeary, “Cinema Studies and Questions of Taste”

Carolyn J. Sweet, “Epic Heroines in Hollywood Blockbusters”

J.R. Rawlins, “The Intellectual Blockbuster: Robert Zemeckis’s Contact”

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Darin D. Kerr, “A Genre of ‘Ideas’: The Science Fiction Blockbuster”
Thomas Schatz’s essay, “The New Hollywood,” makes a compelling case for the way in which *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), while clearly exemplary of a trend in Hollywood filmmaking, benefited from the developments of the decades immediately preceding its release. Moreover, Schatz’s nod towards an analysis of the film’s importance provides a model for the integration of formal and industry analysis, a kind of vertical integration of criticism. For example, describing the movie, Schatz explains that the “performances, camera work, and editing are all crucial to [the film’s effectiveness], as is John Williams’s score” (25). Reckoning with all of the film’s elements (or at least as many as possible), Schatz unites analysis of form and narrative to account for the position the film has in relation to the “blockbusters” that both preceded and followed it. Concerned also with charting the development of new paradigms for production and exhibition, Schatz undertakes to write a brief history of mainstream Hollywood cinema in relationship to the blockbuster, a move that necessarily positions the resulting product as part of a global discourse, certainly, but a discourse that originates in American film practice. Thus, both film history and national cinema are critical modalities operative in Schatz’s essay. Schatz positions the film as an example of the “chase” film, squarely establishing it as a genre film, though one curiously hybridized by the filmic choices made by its director, Steven Spielberg. Likewise, Spielberg himself is characterized in relationship to his larger *oeuvre*, as well as those of contemporaneous directors; the essay thus incorporates auteur theory into the larger critical model at work in the essay. In addition to considering formal detail, Schatz’s mention of critical response to the film’s “political critique” points towards ideological analysis.
As a result, Schatz’s explanation of industry politics is necessarily imbricated with other forms of analysis, suggesting that form and content are, at some level, indivisible from the circumstances in which they were created. A full explication of a film’s “meaning” must necessarily account not only for those things found within the frame, but also the film’s relationship to those things outside the frame.

While this is not a uniquely innovative way of analyzing film practice, Schatz effectively illustrates the benefits of using a multifaceted approach, in terms of its applicability to a specific film and as a means of using the features of a specific film as exemplary of a larger trend. In doing so, Schatz provides a framework through which spectatorship might be more fruitfully examined, that is, as an act coproduced by the relationship between the text and the larger “social, industrial, and economic” milieus in which it is created (26). To say that *Jaws* is a blockbuster, then, is also to say that it is indicative of shifting viewing habits and that the blockbuster (even if we do not posit *Jaws* as the first instantiation of such a category) inaugurates another “way of seeing” film, that movie blockbusters and the ways in which they interact with spectators (and vice versa) foreground cultural shifts intimately and inextricably implicated in a network of practices that moves well beyond the movie houses in which those practices are showcased.
Blockbusters, like bestsellers, occupy a strange position in terms of analysis – they usually cause the critical nose to crinkle in, at worst, disdain or, at best, apathy. Whatever the case, these are the films that have, for the last three decades or so, kept Hollywood going, as the various articles in Part 1, “Industry Matters,” of Movie Blockbusters inform us. They are, therefore, if for no other reason than this, worthy of sustained analysis.

The blockbuster is primarily imagined as an economic genre, that is, money and its dynamics are critically intertwined with the notion of the blockbuster, whether it is the figures at the box-office or the expenses that go into making the film. The difficulty of actually defining exactly what a blockbuster is is a thread running through all the essays, and this seems to situate blockbuster studies on the margins of a much more mainstream strand of film studies, the study of genre/s. And indeed, if a category like cult film, which after all is a pigeonhole dependent on audience reception rather than any internal characteristics particular to the films populating it, can merit much critical discourse, then it is no wonder that the blockbuster should too.

Warren Buckland’s essay “The Role of the Auteur in the Age of the Blockbuster: Steven Spielberg and DreamWorks” aims at some sort of implicit combination of the study of industry processes with a more traditional film-as-text centric approach in analyzing the status of the auteur in the Hollywood of the last thirty years. His classification of the three different kinds of auteurs – internal, external and a combination of the two – is remarkably useful for situating an authorial figure in the blockbuster age. Buckland therefore points towards a useful method for thinking about those kinds of films (and filmmakers) who have been both commercially successful and critically acclaimed, someone like Hitchcock, for instance.
The problem of definition crops up again and again – the reference to cult films above brings to mind the status of a film like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), which, originally released as a “midnight movie,” is *still* in limited release almost thirty-five years after it was made, making it the longest running theatrical release in the history of cinema. Add to this the fact that it remains among the top one hundred highest-grossing films of all time in the United States (if the rates are adjusted for inflation), and we have a critical conundrum on our hands – is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* a blockbuster, then?

In many ways, therefore, *Movie Blockbusters* is a compelling addition to genre studies, and it makes one think about the economics of genre – what is the relationship of genre to the larger economic framework of the film industry? Do blockbusters as a genre maintain the economic status quo (Judith Hess Wright suggests something similar when referring to genre in terms of politics and ideology)? Or does Buckland’s discussion of Spielberg as a complete (i.e., both external and internal) auteur offer some hope (arguably, somewhat restrictively) against the depressing thought that industry processes and the necessities of catering to expectations of formula might subsume the creative process altogether?

The fact that a discussion of movie blockbusters raises so many questions, particularly in the field of genre studies, not to mention other, more varied areas of scholarship, is a testament to the need for historical and theoretical analyses that consider a large field of discursive practices. For example, Part IV “The blockbuster in the international frame” brings to mind the complexities involved in applying standard, Hollywood- or European cinema-centric modes of filmic discourse to non Euro-American cinema. Andrew Willis’s formulations on the Bollywood blockbuster are particularly useful because they reveal what is involved in attempts to locate the Hindi blockbuster outside of Hollywood’s dominant framework. Interestingly, his essay,
“Locating Bollywood: Notes on the Hindi Blockbuster, 1975 to the Present,” fails to create a vocabulary that can adequately grapple with the implications of a cinema that is truly detached from the Hollywood system, both in terms of its modes of production and stylistic, aesthetic and ideological stance.

It is important to realize that Indian cinema is viewed very differently from most classical definitions of cinema-viewing. Madhava Prasad’s commonly-accepted thesis, articulated in *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, is that Indian cinema does not posit the individual viewer as isolated within the audience gazing through the voyeuristic frame of the camera. Indian democratic statehood is a post-Independence, post 1947 conception, imposed at one go in the beginning, and then gradually imposed through filtration from above. India’s political interface with modernity and individualism has therefore always been an uneasy truce with the older community-oriented religious-social-political power groups. Until the mid 1990s, private space in India has always cohabited territory, with a communal gaze whose sanction it has implicitly sought time and again. Indian films are thus a strange phenomenon of both a pre-capitalist and a capitalist mode. Hence, for instance, Prasad notes the uneasiness in classical Bollywood with depictions of the individual “modern” couple formation embodied by the private moment of the kiss, but the relative comfort in accommodating communal lust over sleazy item numbers. This culturally specific film practice and audience experience is why Willis’s formulations must “by necessity” take a schematic approach, for Willis and by extension much of Western academia have very little vocabulary with which to encounter and adequately theorize Indian cinema in general and the communal yet individuated in-between-ness of the Bollywood blockbuster in particular.
While the subject at hand is Indian cinema, similar cases in terms of an inadequacy of vocabulary could be made for mainstream analyses of much of Third Cinema. The kinds of criteria by which a Bollywood filmmaker from the 1970s would theorize his/her art would likely be irreconcilable with dominant Euro-American academic discourse. Different cultural practices create different theoretical norms and traditions, and it becomes a “necessity” for Western scholars to reduce complicated and theoretically disjunctive practices to familiar formulas.

The need to find a global theorizing language for such heterodox applications is perhaps symptomatic of a larger change in film practice today. On the one hand, there is the overarching shadow of global homogenization in which films from different national/cultural frontiers are beginning to blur and bury their differences. Thus, it is becoming more difficult to separate the look, sound and feel of, say, the latest Brazilian blockbuster from the latest Hindi blockbuster. On the other hand, precisely because global cinema is being influenced by film practice from around the world, it seems imperative that scholars from different cultural backgrounds work together to reconcile, theoretically and linguistically, different models of production and spectatorship and to find ways to analyze culturally specific film practices so as to avoid a concomitant cultural loss.

Additional References

I find myself pondering what exactly it is that we—and by “we” I mean academics, critics, and student—are doing with film. Film studies appears intent, even hell-bent, on treating film as an art form; something to be carefully scrutinized, dissected, and discussed for its supposedly “artistic qualities.” Meaning is the end all, be all, of film analysis; we strive to uncover how films make meaning, how their meaning is received, and why it is received as such. Anything that does not warrant such artistic (or perhaps artful) examination, or does not produce “meaningful” meaning, is scoffed at or relegated to the academic dustbin of popular culture, free to be studied, but not quite taken seriously. Hollywood blockbusters certainly fall into this category. Indeed, if, as Jon Lewis suggests, “studio owners prefer to treat Hollywood movies as products….unique only in the amount of money at stake in their production and distribution” (65), then surely this commodification means these films are neither meaningful nor art. Such fare should thusly be left for Richard Schickel’s “subliterates” to mindlessly consume while the enlightened among us weep for the “los[s] or abandon[ment of] the art of narrative” (qtd. in Schatz 39), right?

Pardon the frankness, but such an idea is bullshit. I am far from convinced that anything remotely resembling our Romantic conception of art has been produced since capitalism sank its fangs into humanity’s social and economic relations centuries ago (and, I think, one can argue that art has never existed free from some form of commodification process). What we term “art,” as it relates to film, is really a highly commodified product that exists to generate capital. If film also functions to stimulate the senses or the intellectual faculties, that is an unintended consequence of its role as a “money machine.” Even so called “independent” fare cannot escape the designs of the market. Independent films define themselves as, essentially, “what Hollywood
is not” (see Baron 33-38), therefore creating a sort of economic “can the subaltern speak” dilemma (to borrow a phrase from Gayatri Spivak). In other words, if independent films exist to cater to the niche markets Hollywood overlooks, how can it be considered free of the dominant film industry’s economic processes?

Thus it is important, I think, to explore film, all film, in its economic context; not simply as a piece of art that may be shaped by economic consequences, but as a commodity existing in a complex world of vertical monopoly, horizontal synergy, and ancillary markets. Film studies would benefit greatly from an infusion of scholarly economic theories, bolstered perhaps by psychological and sociological considerations, in an effort to engage with what these films actually do in the marketplace as consumables. If film is indeed a true “mass media,” where the masses interact with and produce meaning in films on an individual basis, should we not then be focusing on how these films are marketed to the masses, how their appeal is constructed to induce people to purchase tickets, rentals, DVDs, and merchandise? The success or failure of these films to do so is a much more empirically measurable effort than attempts to explain in blanket terms how films make meaning. Certainly such pursuits are not as academically “sexy” as endeavoring to uncover which filmic characters are tragically unable to withdraw their libidos from a lost object and thus suffer from Freudian melancholia, yet their inclusion seems a necessity for film studies in this age of media conglomeration. As exploitation filmmaker Herschell Gordon Lewis once said, “I see filmmaking as a business and pity anyone who regards it as an art form.” Such an assertion is instructive in understanding how and why film studies needs to account for the significant role economics plays in our experiences with movies.
Additional References


Justin Philpot  
At the Intersection of Commerce and Culture: The Movie Blockbuster

My interest in the economics of major industry is growing, and I wish it would stop. I’m finding it harder than ever to stop reading about why it is American universities and colleges operate on a consumer service model, and why the auto industry is being forced to innovate by the bottom line while simultaneously claiming a heritage of innovation. The fact that capitalism necessarily breeds risk aversion as a long-term survival strategy falls to the margins when pundits and consumers talk about what the products they buy actually mean. Body styling is innovative – pay no attention to the 20 year-old four cylinder power plant under the hood. The next big Hollywood spectacle is a must-see movie, no matter that the plot is as featureless and sterile as a piece of glass, considered only when it can serve as another spectacular element.

The attitude is so pervasive industry hacks whose job it is to write about films even divorce franchise films from their larger narrative context. Just recently, a reviewer looking at the new Star Trek (J.J. Abrams, 2009) commented, “The script feels remarkably fresh, no small achievement in itself, and takes an ingenious turn with the introduction of a time travel theme…” (Tookey). A fresh script is not only welcome, but it is necessary for a franchise fast approaching its fiftieth anniversary. But there is absolutely nothing new about time travel in relation to Star Trek. The product, the spectacle, the event takes precedent over the meaning and message of the story before it even comes out, reducing the plot to another effect to be seen, commented on and forgotten by everyone save the most die-hard fans. (Fans who are never the target audience for these “event films,” and are also never satisfied.)

Many of the essays in Movie Blockbusters pay particular attention to the industry’s economics. It may therefore be unreasonable to expect direct engagement with the cultural
aspects of blockbuster films, what they mean to an audience as cultural products. But however true I feel the economic analysis is – indeed, I find it fascinating – the cultural studies part of my brain bristles when obvious connections are missed, when important relationships are whitewashed. In his essay “The New Hollywood,” Thomas Schatz details how *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), a “resolutely plot-driven” film, diminishes character depth and development to the point of irrelevance at best, absence at worst. He goes on to say that the spectacular nature of the film and films like it are “increasingly plot-driven, increasingly visceral… increasingly ‘fantastic’ (and thus apolitical), and increasingly targeted at young audiences” (29). I’m no fan of Frankfurt School mass culture theory, but if there was ever a place in an essay to deploy it successfully, its here. Schatz misses an opportunity that I believe is vital to take – to say that film is inherently political, both because of the means of production and the vagaries of audience reception.

Jon Lewis’s essay “Following the Money” is described as notes on political economy, and perhaps for that reason I’m more charitable considering its failings. But Lewis, too, misses the chance to illuminate the power relationship between studios and their audiences and the attendant cultural assumptions inherent to their business models. Lewis writes: “As studios have discovered over the past several years, it doesn’t matter whether or not blockbusters have playability. The key to their promotion and release is a marketability that is factored into the project from the very start of development” (65). Lewis ties this model historically to the advent of conglomerate Hollywood, but ignores the most important result of this conglomeration despite his indirect reference to it in his subtitle. Political economy explores the ways production and consumption are structured through a number of different social and cultural institutions. I can stand a singular focus on a particular industry, but Lewis drops half the equation when it comes
to the product itself. Nothing is made to simply exist; it needs to be purchased to complete its purpose. And the ways in which the industry works to create a product that is easily consumed is at once a power relation and a cultural value.

Additional References

Part 2 Essays

Bryan McGeary
Cinema Studies and Questions of Taste

The first several chapters of Movie Blockbusters point out how the pursuit of money has generally taken precedence over artistic quality since Hollywood became focused on blockbuster films in the mid-1970s. While for the most part I would not disagree with this, I question how many of the authors approach their subject, especially if one assumes that their goal is to improve the state of the film industry. Schatz’s chapter on “The New Hollywood” is filled with quotations from critics who lament the current state of film and long for some mythical golden age of film that I am not convinced ever truly existed. No doubt there were better times, but surely every age had its share of terrible films. Moreover, as Neale points out, the blockbuster is not an entirely new concept, but instead has existed since the earliest days of film.

The complaints about blockbusters seem akin to those of social conservatives who long for a time when people had “traditional” values and were paragons of morality. Scholars who object to blockbusters not only seem to be fooling themselves about the existence of some magical time in which all movies were both artistic and entertaining, they also seem misguided in their belief that complaining about the quality of contemporary movies to other like-minded people is going to change things. Lewis points out that Hollywood is filled with more than its share of crooks; I find it difficult to believe that a bunch of self-important critics voicing their distaste for contemporary films is going to convince these folks to improve their product when it is not in their best interest financially. At the same time, I refuse to believe that these critics are not intelligent enough to be aware of this, which leads me to believe that perhaps all they really want is to be the purveyors of taste and to have their opinions be the ones that carry on in the public consciousness. If their true aim is to reform the film industry, it seems that their efforts
would be better placed making quality films themselves or trying to rally support for government action toward breaking up the conglomerates that run this system. The latter of these seems particularly worthwhile to me, as the government has intervened to hinder monopolistic practices in the film industry in the past. Certainly, the studios found a way around this and as Lewis points out, “In twenty-first-century Hollywood it’s just like the old days, only better” (68). However, I cannot help but wonder if Hollywood can return to its old ways, could not the government also repeat its previous actions? Perhaps that is a bit naïve, but surely it must be a more effective approach than crying about how bad films are today.

I did not find Lewis’s discussion of the cold, calculating methods of the New Hollywood conglomerates to be particularly earth-shattering. It actually reminded me a lot of practices within the music industry that have existed just as long. He describes the process of “sequalization” in which the studios try to maximize profit by not only designing blockbuster franchises with sequels, but also creating other films that essentially imitate those franchises. The music recording industry has been doing both of these things for ages. They have tried to force their artists to follow up enormously successful albums with similar albums, so as not to deviate from the successful formula. Recording companies also try to jump on successful trends by flooding the market with similar bands, whether it was a slew of subpar British bands in the wake of the Beatles or Seattle grunge bands on the heels of Nirvana. I suppose none of it should come as a surprise, since both industries are operated by the same people. In some ways it is rather disconcerting to think that the same small group of people can control nearly everything and rake in endless wealth by using the same old tricks.

Various chapters in the second half of Movie Blockbusters point out how our perceptions of films in terms of artistic quality can be easily shaped by contextual elements that are entirely
separate from the actual content of the movies themselves. Gillian Roberts shows how *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) managed to rise to a status beyond that of simply another technologically impressive visual effects blockbuster. She explains how its December release set it up for more serious Academy Award consideration than if it had been a summer blockbuster with a June release as originally intended. Her discussion of how the Oscars are essentially a commercial for Hollywood reminds me of its analog in the music industry, the Grammy Awards. The albums that get nominated for the major categories always see a surge in sales immediately following the Grammys, particularly if they win awards. Albums that have been out for months sometimes sell more copies in the wake of the Grammy Awards than they did in the months after the initial release. Within the past decade or so, record companies have even started marketing compilations of songs from Grammy-nominated albums in the weeks leading up to the ceremony. Similarly, there always seems to be a tendency to give the major awards, like Album of the Year, to albums that are perceived to have more artistic merit, even if another nominated album is more popular. In recent years, the Grammy Awards have taken some flack for choosing albums like Herbie Hancock’s *River: The Joni Letters* or Steely Dan’s *Two Against Nature* over some of their more popular competitors.

In their discussion of how the context in which films are consumed affects the ways in which they are perceived, Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire write, “It is not the film itself that is the problem but specific contexts of consumption. *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) might be shown at the Broadway, but only in an educational or intellectual context” (191). This reminded me of how certain cult films with notoriously poor production values sometimes get celebrated in an intellectual context. Considering the fact that certain distinctions like this can be made that totally change the way that a movie is perceived in terms of value or artistic merit, it
seems to me that discussions of taste, like that in the chapter by Gillian Roberts, become a bit moot. If seemingly any film can be elevated as long as it is shown in the proper context, then matters of taste become meaningless.

The criticisms of multiplexes that Jancovich and Faire examine can be compared to the objections to blockbusters discussed by Schatz. For in the same way that film scholars long for a mythical past when everything was presumably perfect, as Jancovich and Faire explain, criticisms of the multiplex often involve objections to the soullessness of suburbia and implicit expressions of the mythical belief that everything was perfect when people lived within the city limits. It is possible that these ideas about taste and authenticity are linked to issues of cultural status. By defining other people’s taste in film as lowbrow or middlebrow, and by criticizing their venue(s) for film viewing as lacking authenticity, arbiters of taste can become superior without accomplishing anything of which to be legitimately proud. Rather than producing something worthy of merit, they give themselves an elevated status simply by demeaning the tastes of others.
Carolyn J. Sweet  
Epic Heroines in Hollywood Blockbusters

While seen as indefinable, blockbusters have a common accomplishment – the gorging of the senses. The extensive and costly advertising campaigns that precede the theatrical release of a potential blockbuster establish a rubric of audience expectations that determines whether a film will flop or flourish in the many lucrative markets of potential profitability. So what are the components of this rubric, what does the audience expect when the lights go down and the music swells? Impressive special effects and mind-blowing sound of course, but such filmic elements do not necessarily ensure a film’s success, the desires of the general public, in most cases, are not so easily satiated. In addition to the clear cut means of sense stimulation, a blockbuster must also tell a story, not necessarily a creative or intricate story (although they occasionally do), but a good one. Thus, in alignment with Geoff King’s essay, “Spectacle, Narrative, and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster,” it is the intention of this essay to propose that blockbusters saturate the senses not just with sound, special effects, elaborate mise-en-scene and other elements of spectacle, but with a certain type of narrative formula as well. Where this reflection on blockbuster narratives diverges from King’s discussion will be in its consideration of blockbuster narratives as descendents of the literary tradition of the epic hero, which began with the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh. Additionally, this essay will reflect on the role of heroines v. heroes in blockbusters, considering the ways in which Hollywood’s leading ladies are depicted in such narratives.

The basic components of the epic hero/heroine cycle can be summarized as follows: the main character embarks on a quest to a supernatural or unfamiliar land during which his/her worthiness will be tested. During this quest the central character will be assisted along the way
by human (and at times, mythical) companions and inhibited by villains. At some point in the
narrative the hero/heroine will come very close to defeat or death but will overcome and
eventually triumph. These components are easily adapted to King’s description of blockbuster
narratives in that “they tell carefully organized, more or less linear cause/effect stories organized
around central characters” (120). Audiences expect a straightforward three or five-part narrative
structure with some intense suspense and a happy Hollywood ending. It is no secret that
blockbusters are primarily marketed towards men, yet there have been a number of films with
female protagonists that have captured women’s attention and garnered blockbuster status
throughout film history: The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, 1939), Gone with the Wind (Victor
Fleming, 1939), The Sound of Music (Robert Wise, 1965), Speed (Jan de Bont, 1994), Titanic
(James Cameron, 1997) to name a few.

Each of the films mentioned exhibits at least a few characteristics of the epic cycle. In
each narrative a journey is undertaken by the heroine: Dorothy travels to Oz (One might note that
Dorothy’s journey takes place in her imagination); Scarlet lives through the Civil War; Maria
goes from the convent to the Von Trapp home and then through the Alps to freedom; Annie
careens through Los Angeles on an out of control bus; and Rose travels across the Atlantic
Ocean. Each woman has one or more companions who assist her on her journey: Dorothy has
Toto, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion; Scarlet has Melanie and others; Maria
has God; Annie and Rose have their respective Jacks. Each heroine is inhibited along the way by
their own ominous villains: the Wicked Witch; the Yankees; unruly children and Nazis; a
terrorist; and an iceberg. Desperation is reached at some point in each narrative, yet in most cases
the outcome is a happy one, although Jack sinks with the Titanic while Rose escapes with her
life, and Rhett’s frank abandonment leaves Scarlett unhappy but likely gives many audience
members a twinge of happiness at her much deserved comeuppance. Regardless of whether or not women in the audience admired these heroines, they likely identified with their trials and tribulations and no doubt were glad to see female protagonists on the big screen.

In recent years women have played less than adventurous roles. Of the top twenty grossing films of 2007, only three had a leading female character, with one a princess (*Enchanted* [Kevin Lima]), and two victims of unplanned pregnancies (*Knocked Up* [Judd Apatow], *Juno* [Jason Reitman]). *Enchanted* can be considered an epic narrative as Giselle travels from the fictive world of Andulasia to New York City where she embarks on a quest to find her true love and, while inhibited by Queen Narissa, in the end saves the day and, in the spirit of Disney, goodness and true love triumph over evil. *Knocked Up* and *Juno* offered their protagonists very little action apart from the horrors of pregnancy and childbirth, which are always so eloquently depicted in Hollywood films. Recent filmic representations have relegated women to romantic comedies where their supporting roles have left much to be desired. As we look ahead to another summer blockbuster season, what heroines will Hollywood have to offer?

In December 2008, Firstshowing.net, a site that proposes to “connect Hollywood with its audience,” published a survey of 2000 people conducted by Fandango to evaluate the most anticipated blockbusters of 2009. Interestingly, Fandango divided the results in the following manner: “Most Anticipated Blockbusters of 2009 – According to Women,” and “Most Anticipated Blockbusters of 2009 – According to Men.” The results were as follows:

**Most Anticipated Blockbusters of 2009 - According to Women**
1. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*
2. *New Moon*
3. *Transformers: Revenge of The Fallen*
4. *Angels & Demons*
5. *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*
Most Anticipated Blockbusters of 2009 - According to Men
1. Star Trek
2. Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen
3. Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince
4. X-Men Origins: Wolverine
5. Terminator Salvation
6. Watchmen
7. Angels & Demons
8. Public Enemies
9. G.I. Joe
10. New Moon

Thus, of the thirteen films that made the cut, only two feature female protagonists: New Moon, which is number two according to women but barely makes the men’s list, and The Lovely Bones, which is low on the women’s list and does not make the men’s top ten. (In the Harry Potter film, Hermione is a major character but far less important than Harry.)

One might notice that several of the films on the women’s list are geared to children or young audiences: Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian, a sequel to the 2007 film, and Where the Wild Things Are, an adaptation of Maurice Sendak’s popular children’s book. New Moon’s teenage Bella has potential as a relevant heroine yet, as with most literary adaptations, the filmic character will not be developed in the same degree of depth as when she was in Stephanie Meyer’s novels. The Lovely Bones, another adaptation, tells the story of Clarissa, a murdered fourteen year-old who seeks vengeance for her death from heaven.

A striking feature in the 2009 Hollywood lineup is that Bella, Clarissa, and Hermione are all teenage girls. It seems that this year, women protagonists are not a component of the blockbuster rubric, even though films with women as epic heroines can generate enormous
profits; *Titanic* is the number one grossing film of all time – worldwide. Thus, while there are no
leading ladies at present, female protagonists have been able to fit the narrative formula of the
blockbuster, which leaves hope for the future.

Additional References

“Fandangos Most Anticipated Blockbusters of 2009,” available online at
http://www.firstshowing.net/2008/12/26/fandangos-most-anticipated-blockbusters-of-2009-list/
(accessed September 24, 2009).
J.R. Rawlins
The Intellectual Blockbuster: Robert Zemeckis’s Contact

The first time I saw Contact (Robert Zemeckis, 1997), I was with a friend who liked films by director Robert Zemeckis. He told me that Zemeckis’s Forrest Gump (1994) represents the outward search for truth and meaning in a simple, American-centered world, with Gump being an extroverted character who seeks knowledge through relationships. He said that by comparison, Ellie, the central character in Contact, is an astrophysicist who eschews religion and chooses to search for meaning by means of radio signals from outer space. My friend explained that even though Ellie’s is an extremely outward search, Contact is actually a more internalized, introverted metaphor of truth-seeking. I was intrigued by this comparison and whenever I watch Contact, I return to that original framework. Seeing Contact for the first time initiated my interest in Carl Sagan, a high profile astrophysicist who wrote many popular science books, including the original Contact and the screen play, which was completed just before he died. I mention all this to introduce the themes I hope to examine in this essay: auteur criticism, films as metaphors for deep spiritual longing, and the confusing definition of a blockbuster. Essentially, how does the involvement of an auteur like Zemeckis relate to a film being classified as a blockbuster, even when the movie seems to carry implications of deeper meaning, as in the case of Contact?

Peter Krämer addresses many of these concepts in his essay. He seems especially interested in the ways Contact stretches and challenges our definition of what a blockbuster is and what it can be expected to accomplish. Krämer explains that from the very beginning of the film, “the shot suggests a significant self-reflexive dimension” as the camera zooms out gradually from earth to the atmosphere, outer planets, stars, etc. (128) It is a very powerful and humbling opening shot. It ends by fading out of the extreme edges of the galaxy and fading into
a young Ellie’s eye. Clearly, the movie is going to address “the relationship between mankind and the universe…personal longings and technological and scientific endeavors” (128). Krämer suggests the film is an updated version of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick 1968) in that both address space and intellectual questions (129). With *2001* serving as a precedent for thoughtful movies being blockbusters, Krämer notes that *Contact* has been related to “what is perhaps the most powerful critical metaphor for contemporary blockbuster cinema – the rollercoaster ride” (129). *Contact* certainly is a rollercoaster ride, for from the beginning the viewer is pulled into a ride that culminates with nearly an hour of frenzied resolutions.

The adventure, however, is a more than just “a purely sensual ride” for Ellie because its deals with “the very foundations of her being, her individual existence, her relationship with parents and others, and her conception of her place in the universe” (130). *Contact* uses CGI and other special effects, not as ends in themselves, but as vehicles that reinforce the gravity of the metaphor. That is, space exploration and the search for extraterrestrial life is closely related to humans’ inner angst and feelings of inadequate spiritual connection on earth. While Ellie is deeply rational and skeptical of religion, the questions that drive her are not very different from those a religious person might ask. Krämer argues that the film is not only a portrait of “Ellie’s journey across the universe,” it also takes the audience members on similar journeys of their own (130). It seems fair to conclude that *Contact* is a blockbuster, albeit an intellectual, multilayered one.

Much of what drives *Contact* into the realm of the blockbuster is the status and reputation of Robert Zemeckis. Amazingly, all but one of Zemeckis’s movies from 1985 to 1997 became one of the top ten grossing films for that year (131). With the exception of Steven Spielberg, Zemeckis has more films in Top 25 and Top 100 lists of highest grossing films of all time than
any other director. Krämer labels Zemeckis “Hollywood’s most consistently commercially successful director since the mid-1980s” (131). Zemeckis is typically very involved in editing and rewriting the scripts for his movies (131). This is similar to how James Cameron wrote the script for *Titanic* (1997). Being involved in the entire production process perhaps leads to these directors’ success. At least they know how an audience comes to be enthralled by a certain kind of story told in a specific way. It is not surprising that Zemeckis was able to fine tune Sagan’s already excellent script – which is very close to the end result – in a way that made the story engaging without sacrificing its depth or seriousness. The result is a rich narrative that can reach disparate viewers on many different levels and in many different ways.

*Contact* appeals to women in a very direct and open way. Even though the target demographic for most movies is the 18-30 year old male, *Contact* stars a female protagonist who is smart, resourceful, and an all around intriguing, complicated character that changes her views and outlooks as the film progresses (132-133). At the beginning of the story, Ellie is deeply disturbed, even as an adult, by her father’s death when she was young. Much of the film is comprised of her recollections of him, missing him, and meeting a series of men who remind her of aspects of her father. While Ellie is perhaps looking for a replacement of the “supportive male figure” that she lost as a child, she is a strong, confident character whom young female viewers can admire (133). Moreover, like many “successful family-adventure movies…the loss of the father…provides the focus for the story” (133). In *Contact*, this operates on many levels. The metaphysical relationship between Ellie and her father is a metaphor for her relationship to questions about the existence of God, which find resolution, according to Krämer, when “at the end the protagonist’s original familial issues are resolved and peace of mind is regained [for]
although the lost father never really returns, he is present as a memory…indeed…as a spirit” (135).

*Contact* is able to succeed as an intellectual, mass-market film because it “foregrounds intellectual issues and the ways in which the film’s protagonist negotiates her intellectual worldview with her emotional and spiritual needs” (135). The question becomes—is the film too intellectual? No. Could it have been a bigger hit if it played more to the excitement and scope of the images rather than using them to engage deeper, spiritual questions? No, and it need not be, for as Krämer points out, *Contact* is similar to the successful family adventure Biblical epics of the 1950s and 1960s in which “audio-visual spectacle” facilitates audience members’ “spiritual experiences” (139).

It is elitist to argue that popularity is necessarily inversely proportional to seriousness or depth or complicated content, but that is what some critics seem to do. The establishment tends to create criteria for a ‘quality’ movie that necessarily eliminates blockbusters from the discussion. Not surprisingly, *Contact* has been discussed in these terms. It has been assumed that regular moviegoers cannot understand the film and so have a satisfying experience—much like what would happen, the argument goes, if these audiences were to attend a symphony orchestra performance. In other words, *Contact* has been seen as an “unabashedly esoteric” movie that will surely not meet success because the fans are not smart enough to understand it (136). This idea suggests that film critics feel it is their responsibility to be social gatekeepers by defining and packaging cultural products. In this packaging, products are misrepresented or even discarded; either way gatekeepers are led by the assumption that erudition and dedication enable them (and only them) to truly understand a film. This arrogant approach is repulsive to individualist conservatives as well as anti-censorship liberals, and yet even the Internet has not completely
unseated such culture police. The common fan empowers critics by responding to movies that receive ebullient praise (“Oscar-worthy performance”) and being increasingly skeptical of movies judged to be “bombs.” It is this elitist dilemma that is at the core of any substantive blockbuster conversation; questions of taste and audience manipulation must be addressed. I believe Zemeckis understands this tenuous situation and as a consequence works to produce films that probe deep questions in material that makes it possible to label the movie a sure-fire “blockbuster.”
In spite of the overwhelming shift from a theological to a secular worldview, we are nevertheless still a people longing/searching for access to transcendent experience. German theologian and comparative religion scholar Rudolf Otto wrote in 1917 of the human draw toward the “numinous,” a “non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self.” This experience involves what he called the “mysterium tremendum et fascinens,” a power that attracts while creating fear, fascinates while confounding. Humans produce different ways to talk about this desire, and until recently the Gods of formal and informal religion functioned as the main texts for discussion. Otto suggests we might stifle this desire or attempt to satisfy it through any number of lesser means, but we cannot deny its basic presence in our lives.

Essentialist problems notwithstanding, humans do seem to gravitate towards spiritual satisfaction, an expansion of the soul, a desire to be united with something greater than
ourselves. Denying this desire seems counterintuitive. The purpose of raising this position here is not to debate its merits or to consider best approaches to satisfying its demands, but to suggest that movie theaters (along with sport stadiums and music halls) have perhaps replaced the church/temple/mosque as primary worship venues and that movies themselves are texts through which we attempt to encounter a divine “Other,” to experience a transcendent moment that sweeps us away, absorbed within the engulfing darkness of the theater, the stereophonic surround sound, the mysterious light both projected onto and simultaneously reflected off a multi-storied screen. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that we give a certain measure of worship to these mediums of story and spectacle, both the sites and the people contained within the text broadcast at those sites.

Perhaps “stars” take on god-like status because we need them to be gods. When those gods are put in a narrative that includes sex, love, evil, strength, suffering, destruction, weakness, depravity, redemption, then perhaps out of that cauldron of raw humanity comes a moment that transports us to a deeper place within ourselves. Can these gods and their kingdoms ultimately satisfy? Absolutely not; but that is hardly the point, except to suggest that the entertainment industry (like the funeral business) will always have an audience, especially as formal religion is moved to the periphery of our experience. “Abundance” and “intensity” open the possibility of encountering something beyond the “scarcity and banality” of everyday life. Might blockbusters offer an opportunity, however weak and fleeting, to touch/taste a form of “transcendence” offered through secular cultural experience?
In discussing the incredibly widespread success of *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), Gillian Roberts asserts that after the movie garnered its near sweep at the Academy Awards, around the world “hundreds of millions of people will eventually have this experience in common” (162). To what effect; I ask this question not directly of *Titanic*, but of any movie that is seen by “millions.” I find myself reflecting on movies and their worldview shaping potential. Of course, we all take different things from movies, but that only proves to secure my point here: we all take something from movies and are different (however slightly) as a result.

While we might easily write off those who suggest there is always a direct cause and effect relationship between what is seen on screen and immediate subsequent behavior, it is equally ridiculous to deny the ideology influencing effect of a movie text. No movie ever comes to us neutrally. A screening of director interviews backs this up as they try to explain why they made the movie and how it reflects their vision of the world or how they would like some aspect of it to be. Movies become the site of ideological exploration and we are always changed in some way for having viewed a movie, if for no other reason than we have met characters and vicariously experienced their “lives.”

A little self reflection produced this slightly embarrassing history from my first few years of movie watching: from *Rocky* (John G. Avidesen, 1976) I learned to compete against all odds; from *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977) I learned notions of “cool”; from *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *Willie Wonka* (Mel Stuart, 1971), and *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, 1964) I learned to imagine; from *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) I learned to fear the water; from *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, 1961) I learned about race, love,
and hate; from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977) I learned to distrust the government; and so on. Over the years I have met people who haven’t seen these movies and it strikes me that we view the world very differently as a result.

Yes, an abundance of other experiences and texts have shaped my perspective and theirs, but we should not underestimate the molding and altering effect of movies (especially on minds not yet full of text like mine when I first saw those movies). We too quickly run to place “value” on this idea, whether it’s “good” or “bad” that a certain movie is consumed, and then the discussion crumbles into polarized conceptions of “what is good/bad.” As a result, I don’t think most people take a serious enough inventory of the movies they’ve seen and their resultant view of “reality” and how the world around them works.

“Tell Us If We Should Like It or Not…”

Emanuel Levy’s observation that the Academy members “function as peers, critics, and tastemakers” is quite provocative (155). We know about Hollywood’s control over what gets seen or not seen (including their threatened position regarding indie/foreign films), their conglomerate control over production, distribution, and exhibition of movies and products. We know that the Academy Awards are really about Hollywood celebrating itself. However, what hit me during of our reading (and what is likely obvious to anyone paying attention), is that Hollywood also tells us, largely through the awards ceremonies and advertising, which movies are “good” and worthy of our viewing. While it makes sense that the industry would do this, it’s intriguing to me because EVERYONE has such a different explanation for what makes a movie “good” or not. I can’t list the movies others have told me were “good” that I hated or friends said were worthless that I had to see twice. Clearly, we are all bringing different expectations to the
movies; it would be useful to better understand what standard Hollywood is using at any given time to say this is “good.” The industry’s assessment seems to change over time, which makes sense since the notion of “Hollywood” we use so flippantly is comprised of individuals who exist in changing relations of power.

James Cameron’s reticence to label Titanic as either a “movie” or a “film” is instructive. I don’t think the average movie watcher has any idea what the real battles are regarding prestige films and blockbusters—that is an academic or insider/trade journal issue that the common press and reviewer doesn’t usually bring to the attention of Joe Moviegoer. While forty-one and having watched thousands of movies, until now I had no sense of the gap between the Cineplex at the shopping mall in Beavercreek and the art house theater in downtown Yellow Springs. I did not understand why Yellow Springs never showed movies I had heard of, or why those movies never made their way to the mall. While this could be chalked up to my ignorance, the point remains: most people don’t realize they’re being told what is good/bad and certainly aren’t aware of the politics behind such determinations. I’m not entirely sure what difference knowing will make in my life (other than making me annoying to those in my circle not yet “enlightened”), but I’m glad I now know nonetheless!
Tonight I intend to see *Star Trek* (J.J. Abrams, 2009). Before I see the film, I will attend a *Star Trek* party thrown by a friend (who will wear a costume, undoubtedly with accompanying accoutrements, probably his replica phaser and tricorder). The menu will be comprised of “dishes” drawn from a *Star Trek* cookbook, including gagh, filet of tribble, hasperat, chum loesh, ribs of targ, Vorham rolls, Pak Tor grains in Storish style, vole in yamok sauce, desert raptor in citrus and flash root, and lagora paste with flat bread, each a dish with an accompanying interplanetary origin. Beverages will include blood wine, Romulan ale, Bajoran spring wine, chipa punch, Saurian brandy, and Aldebaran whiskey, all guaranteed to work their intoxicating magic on any alien physiognomy. Though guests are invited, even encouraged, to wear costumes, I doubt that many will. We will then all proceed to the Levis Commons multiplex to view the film in all of its digital splendor. Clearly, this evening is, from my friend’s point of view, intended to be an “event.” Indeed, the movie itself is poised to be an “event,” a “blockbuster.” Julian Stringer articulates our relationship to such films in the introduction to *Movie Blockbusters*:

> We are all experts on movie blockbusters. “Event movies” target the mass audience, making lack of knowledge of their existence virtually impossible. We may as individuals choose to consume them, or we may choose to avoid them, but either way we share in common the simple fact of knowing something about them. (1)

One can hardly not feel targeted (“Set phasers on stun!”) by the marketing blitz accompanying the revamped *Star Trek* franchise. The movie’s television advertising campaign has been quite aggressive, and now ancillary marketing, as in the Burger King television ads touting *Star Trek*
glasses and featuring the “King”ons (essentially Klingons with Burger King masks), has begun to saturate the air waves, as well. When one combines this with the franchise’s storied history, a history that dates back over forty years, one would be hard pressed not to find someone who is at least familiar with the film’s name, if not more intimately connected with the franchise in some way (if only via catch phrase – Beam me up, Scotty!). I go into the experience tonight as an expert: on movie blockbusters, on Star Trek, on science fiction, on my own personal taste, and it is precisely this expertise, particularly in the final category, on the parts of millions of viewers that will make of this blockbuster, and of many others like it, an example of the shifting of the margins in American culture.

Star Trek, of course, has its origins in Gene Roddenberry’s television show from the 1960s, a show noted primarily for its remarkable longevity and vociferous fan base. Though Roddenberry publicly touted the series as a Western transposed to a science fiction milieu, referring to it as Wagon Train in space (utilizing known quantities in an attempt to manifest market appeal, like any good Hollywood huckster), he confided to close friends and associates that it would have as its true model another adventure story, though one that served as philosophical exploration, Gulliver’s Travels. This dual identity, the attempt to serve multiple constituencies, often in a somewhat surreptitious fashion, might be seen as the ongoing aspirational struggle of the contemporary blockbuster. Roddenberry wanted to offer his audience more than just another “television show”; for better or worse, he wanted to offer moral instruction, and there is often something of the high-toned, not to mention the occasionally pedantic, to be found in the lessons of the original series. As time went on, however, the series’ popularity grew, as did the mainstream appeal of science fiction. Eventually, Star Trek, and
science fiction itself, became big business, and moral instruction is often something that finds itself relegated to the scale of the Lilliputian in blockbuster terms.

Michael Allen describes the typical blockbuster movie as “made up of several elements – a large budget, enhanced production values, star presence, large-scale story material, and display of technical virtuosity – not all of which may be present in any one instance” (101). In the case of the new Star Trek film, the estimated budget of the film is 150 million dollars, a large percentage of which undoubtedly goes to the production values and “display of technical virtuosity,” particularly given that none of the film’s stars are marquee names. The story material, strangely for a genre obsessed with the future, essentially returns us to the characters’ pasts, telling an origin story (a move that aligns it with the successful reboot of the Batman franchise with Batman Begins [Christopher Nolan 2005]). Of course, there’s a world threatening plot to be foiled, ensuring that lots of things will explode in suitably grandiose fashion, but what seems truly remarkable about the film (prior to a viewing, of course) is the way in which it seems to encapsulate the internal tensions of the contemporary blockbuster.

The Star Trek franchise, despite its intermittent successes on the big screen, has largely been characterized as a television success, and its fan base has often been laughingly depicted as composed largely of overgrown man children who take themselves (and the utopian ideals of Gene Roddenberry) far too seriously. It will almost undoubtedly make money this weekend, however, and a large part of that success can (and should) be attributed to the auteur name that accompanies the film, an auteur whose career has much more to do with television than with film: J.J. Abrams, creator of such hit television shows (and genre mainstays) as Alias and Lost. Star Trek is a classic example of the complexity of the circulation of contemporary taste. Is it
low brow? Is it middle brow? Is it low brow aspiring to be high brow? Is it high brow with a low
brow patina? How does genre factor in to the equation? What exactly is going on here?

Few would argue for Star Trek as high brow entertainment, but I would suggest that the
ways in which we process high brow and low brow are undergoing constant redefinition. As
science fiction has made its ascent from the cultural basement, tastemakers have had to, on some
level, reckon with the genre’s intellectual history. For the most part, science fiction is often
characterized as a genre of “ideas.” Mary Shelley, when she wrote Frankenstein, couldn’t
possibly have guessed that her musings on the relationship between science and mortality would
have kick started a genre that could offer us both Philip K. Dick’s The Man in the High Castle
and the most puerile Spock/Kirk fan fiction. Science fiction’s current uneasy position in the
mainstream means that it has to navigate carefully around the anti-intellectualism America is
well known for. The Sci-Fi Channel increasingly moves away from what might be considered
“core” science fiction programming in an attempt to broaden its audience. The blockbuster wants
to exploit the widescreen potential of science fiction in terms of effects and scope, but doesn’t
want, for the most part, to have to deal with the pitfalls of being associated with a social
underclass. Geek is only chic up to a point. Star Trek wants to play both ends against in the
middle in the service of a bottom line.

In almost all publicity for the film, it is touted as a “reboot.” From this point of view, it
clearly isn’t meant to be a standalone enterprise (pun intended). Rather, after letting the fields lay
fallow for a few years, Paramount has come to see what harvest it can reap from this perennial
cash crop. We can look forward to the inevitable sequels, and presumably, Constitution class
starships will grace the spaceways of television once more. The real question, however, lies in
whether a new generation of American consumer, one coming of age under different
circumstances, is willing to embrace a slight variation on an old vision. In this respect, the film’s
timing is perhaps as close to perfect as it could possibly get. Roddenberry’s vision of a bright (or
at least shiny) future in which humanity works together to solve its social ills seems perfectly
geared to appeal to an America under Obama. Outer space escapism at the cinema seems the
perfect answer to the country’s economic doldrums, and the blockbuster Hollywood film, with
its “Yes, We Can...blow it up” know how shows us that Americans still have the wherewithal to
produce top quality imperialism on a galactic scale.
The nature of the movie blockbuster is accompanied by a far-reaching economic, cultural, and socio-political complexity. While the motion picture itself forms the central entity, it is surrounded by many extra-textual components. Thomas Schatz identifies movie blockbusters as cultural commodities that generate vertically integrated business sectors such as theme parks, merchandise like posters or toys, and soundtracks. For instance, *Dick Tracy* (Warren Beatty, 1990) was released in conjunction with three soundtracks (Schatz 35). One extra-textual component whose complexity is oftentimes unconsciously accepted, and thus its significance remains unrecognized, is the public space of cinemas. In “The Best Place to See a Film: The Blockbuster, The Multiplex, and the Context of Consumption,” Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire focus on multiplex cinemas and argue that the blockbuster and multiplex cinemas “are intimately related” (190). In doing so, they highlight the broader cultural complexity of the multiplex cinema as a space of mass consumption and venue that is best understood as involving practices that extend beyond watching movies.

As a prime example of their case study, Jancovich and Faire discuss the Nottingham Showcase, which is particularly interesting as it embodies an American cultural entity implemented into a non-American culture. On the one hand, the Nottingham Showcase is, as the management claims, meant to be a space of “spectacle, comfort, and luxury”; on the other hand, as Jancovich and Faire explain, it is “organized around a series of related concerns about Americanization” (192).

Although the Nottingham Showcase was not the first multiplex cinema in the U. K., its eleven screens allowed it to compete with London’s multiplex cinemas. The abundance and
variety of blockbusters the Nottingham Showcase offers points to its spectacular character. In terms of “comfort” and “luxury,” Jancovich and Faire direct readers’ attention to the vast amount of parking spaces (room for 850 automobiles), a convenience of special import since geographical space is highly limited in the U.K.

Although some of Janovich’s and Faire’s respondents considered the multiplex atmosphere “visually impressive but also welcoming,” others “suggested that the place lacked identity” (196). Customers complained that theatres were cold due to overuse of air conditioning and that the architecture itself created an impersonal atmosphere. Other respondents criticized the lack of audience interaction, with the multiplex setting failing to facilitate conversations after screenings. Jancovich and Faire also explain that Nottingham’s planning officer was concerned that the Showcase would limit the public’s choice and bankrupt smaller independent theaters. In the eyes of critics, American modernity, represented by multiplex cinemas, came to “signify the negative features of materialism and mass production” (197).

Jancovich’s and Faire’s observation points to an interesting conclusion: “Cultural distinction ranks not only films, but also places within which they are consumed” (199). Movie theaters have a stronger impact on cultural consumption than one might assume. Different spaces of theatrical exhibition appeal to different social groups. Multiplex cinemas, especially in junction with movie blockbusters, appeal to the consumption patterns of certain audiences. While this connection is not surprising, Jancovich and Faire expand understanding of film audiences by providing evidence that movie goers’ experiences are “far more diverse and differentiated, and may even be fractured and opposed to one another,” for it may be the space as well as the movie that determines the audience (199).